

俺はやっぱ 気づかない2



望公太

NOZOMI KOTA

イラスト タカツキイチ

I Really Don't Notice

vol.2

by Kouta Nozomi

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僕は
やっぱ
気づかない2



Text Right to Left:

“RinByouTouShaKaiJinRestuSaiZen— Rai!”

“... She’s always letting loose, that Kikyoun-san.”

“What are... those monsters...”



「……考えとく」
小さくそう零し、
桔梗院さんは写真を鞆にしまった。
すごく、大事そうに。

“... I’ll consider it.”

She lightly muttered,
before putting the picture away in her bag.
Treating it extremely precious.

Prologue: 'Ignorance is a Bliss'

"In this wide, wide world, do you think you're the main character? Or are you a side character?"

I wonder when it was that he asked me such a thing. It felt like just yesterday, but it felt like it could just as well have been over ten years ago. At the time, as I recall, he was reading a small and thin paperback book, while I was reading a big, thick Corocoro.

That's how we would usually spend our time.

He made a bittersweet smile as he waited for my answer.

"Let's see..." I thought.

When I was small, I thought I was the hero. That there was an incredible power hidden in me, that I'd someday become a hero of justice, that I'd fight the bad guys for the sake of world peace. I firmly believed it.

But as I grew older, such thoughts faded away.

In Gentle Breeze Park, the lady in the strange suit taught me.

There are no heroes of justice in the world.

It's simply impossible.

If in the million to one chance a hero of justice existed—that a protagonist was out there, then at that very moment, as I wasn't fighting for the world, I was a side role you could find wherever you looked. Nothing more than bystander A.

But despite that.

"I think I'm the main character. In my life's story, the main character can only be me."

For the time being, I decided to say something cool. I think my strongest intention was to convince myself.

"Hmm. I see. You say some cool things."

"What do you think?"

"I don't think I'm either. No, they're just both wrong would be more accurate. I'm not a main or side character, and no one in the world's a main or side

character.”

Unable to grasp his meaning, I tilted my head.

“Main characters and side characters don’t exist in this world, And it goes without saying that villains don’t exist either. All that’s there in the world... is readers.”

“Readers?”

“Humans are all readers browsing a book titled ‘self’. An unfortunate person’s ‘self’ just wasn’t written to their tastes, that’s all there is to it.”

With a somewhat pitying smile, he spoke as if he had it all figured out. I myself, half understanding, half oblivious, somehow managed to ask back.

“But if humans are all readers, then who’s writing the story?”

“That’s—”

He stuck up his index finger to point at the sky. Bitter and sweet, a smile that truly fit him floating on his face, he spoke in jest.

“—Got to be god, right?”

Chapter 1: Transfer Student and Childhood Friend

“Yeah. I received the living expenses. Yep. No, I’m hanging up. International calls are expensive. Yep. Talk to you later.”

I one-sidedly hung up. Dad was a talker, if you let him be, he’d talk for over an hour, so I needed to be cautious myself. After hanging up, I sat on the living room sofa, reaching my hand out to the envelope that had been delivered yesterday.

Inside, a hundred thousand yen.

It came from my parents overseas, my current living expenses.

Personally speaking, instead of sending over cold hard cash, I’d prefer it if they did a bank transfer, but dad said, “There’ll be some trouble if it goes through a bank. The money laundering will—” so it was settled with ‘in-cash payments at regular intervals’.

Was it really alright to send money in a common brown envelope? And wait, when this money is supposed to be being directly sent from overseas, why was it in Japanese bills?

“... Well, I guess it doesn’t matter.”

Linking thoughts became a pain, so I abandoned them.

It’s my father we’re talking about, so I’m sure he prepared it in Japanese Yen with me in mind. He’s a splendid dad who taught me what money laundering means. ‘It’s that terrible thing that happens when you forget your money in your pants pocket, and it gets all messed up in the wash.’

I clenched the hundred thousand yen in my hands.

“... I’ll use it with care.”

It’s the money mom and dad worked their butts off earning for my sake. I have to plan it all out without wasting a cent.

When I was softly seeping in familial love, ding-dong, the bell rang. Who could it be on a holiday morning? I headed for the entrance, opened the door—and

jumped back.

Because of the strange getup of the man before me.

To sum it up in two words, a practicing monk, was the feel he gave off. Because of the amigasa he wore, I could only see his mouth and the slight beard growing from his chin. He wore a black priest's garb, with Japanese sandals on his feet and a large khakkhara in his hand.

I lost my words before the strange-looking man.

"Mister!"

He suddenly cried. Clink, he sounded his staff. With a grim countenance, he surveyed the area.

"This house is possessed by an evil spirit!"

"W-what...?"

Just what was this person saying?

"This is bad... I've been on a long exorcising journey, but this is the first time I've felt such strong waves. If it's not dealt with soon, you're in for some real trouble!"

"..."

"Look, right behind you..."

"Eh!? IS there something there?"

"This is bad. It's too terrible to even describe..."

"Hey! Don't clam up there, what is it!?"

"Anyways, calm down. Are you listening? Look calmly into my eyes, and listen to what I have to say."

"A-alright."

"This house is possessed by an evil spirit."

"... Is it really..."

No, no way, that's not happening... for this house to be possessed...

"Hasn't anything bad happened to you lately?"

"I-It has!"

I bit on with all my might.

"Yesterday, I hit my little toe on the corner of the dresser."

“Yeah, that’s without a doubt the evil spirit’s doing.”

“T-then when today’s morning horoscope put me at rock bottom...”

“No mistake,” said the practicing monk. “Is there anything else troubling you?”

“Umm... a girl in my class has a weak stomach, and has to run to the bathroom a lot.”

“Yeah, that’s undoubtedly the evil spirit.”

“Then when one of my underclassmen cosplays as a witch and romps around town...”

“It’s the evil spirit.”

“When my upperclassman lonesomely practices ventriloquism alone...”

“Do I even have to say it?”

O-oh no...

The evil spirit possessing my house is causing problems for everyone. The reason they all got just a little strange like that was all my fault...

Aaah! How can I look them in the eye again!?

“It’s nothing to be down about, mister.”

As I sank to my knees in despair, the monk called out in a gentle voice.

“You haven’t done anything wrong. It’s all the evil spirit’s work.”

Taking off his amigasa, he directed warm eyes at me.

“... But what am I supposed to...”

“Don’t worry about a thing!”

He gave me a strong pat on the shoulder, producing an urn from the sleeve of his garment.

“I embedded this with an evil-dispelling force, the tha~nkful urn. As long as you set this urn out in the demon gate of your home, I’m sure it will immediately clean away the evil spirit!”

“R-really!?”

Raising a joyous cry, I stared fixatedly at the urn.

... Whoah.

Now that he brought it up, I definitely got the feeling it was letting off some sort of incredible power. At a glance, it might look like what might be sold at the

hundred yen shop, but I'm sure it was bestowed with high-class techniques an amateur like me had no hopes of noticing.

"But, and it really pains me to say it, this face was made with exceptionally valuable soil, so the price tag can't help but be on the hefty side..."

"I-it costs money..."

I didn't think it would be free, but if it was too expensive...

"What are you talking about!? It's that obsession with money that fuels the evil spirits of this house!"

"Say what!?"

I see, I treasured the money my parent sent me so much I became a money-hungry fiend?

Well certainly, there's no point in money if you just save it away. The more you use, the more the Japanese economy flourishes.

"... Understood. I'll buy that urn!"

"Oh! Bless you, young man! I knew you'd understand!"

"So about the cost..."

"Right... ah, by the way, around how much would you be able to put up at a moment's notice?"

"I currently have around one hundred thousand yen inside the house..."

"Wow! What a coincidence! The price of this urn just happens to be exactly one hundred thousand yen!"

"Eeh!? Really!?"

"Really!"

"Whoah. That really is a coincidence. I'm sure it was my fate to purchase that urn!"

"It's just as you say! Now, now, before you change your mind—I mean, you'd better install this urn as soon as possible, so if you would..."

"Yes, understood!"

I hurriedly returned to the living room and picked up the envelope with my living expenses.

Dad, mom.

I'll be doing some worthwhile shopping.

“Eighty, ninety, one hundred. Yes, sure enough. Then here’s your urn. Take care.”

After I gave him the money, the monk handed over the thankful urn before immediately preparing to leave.

“I’m supposed to put it in the demon gate, right? Where exactly in the house is demon gate, specifically?”

“Ah, don’t worry about that. That thing’s real effective, so just leave it wherever.”

“...”

His service suddenly became quite arbitrary.
I could acutely feel a, nothing left to do here, aura seeping through the air.

“U-um, would you at least give me your name?”

I asked the monk who had turned his back to me, leaving in a huff.
There, he turned, giving a refreshing grin.

“I am but a lowly travelling monk.”

Pulling his amigasa down over his eyes, he hid his expression. And firmly raising his thumb he said this.

“My name’s not worth giving.”

H-how cool!

Shot through the heart, I continued waving to the monk until he was out of sight.

Wow, there really are good people out there.

I’m sure that person would continue his journey, purifying people of evil spirits.
Thank you, nameless monk! I’ll never forget you!

“I was triiiicccccckkkeeeeddddd!”

Finally noticing I had been set up the next morning, felt so irritated and pathetic, in a corner of the classroom, I held my head in agony.

Whatdoldowhatdoldowhatdoldowhatdoldowhatdoldo...

I lost one hundred thousand yen.

My current living expenses all went poof.

How am I supposed to live on from tomorrow...

“... You know,”

As I crouched, from overhead, a voice filled with ample pity rained down.

“Kagoshima-kun, you really are an idiot.”

Chck. The knife of words pierced deep into my heart. If this was a manga, that would be when a sharp jetting arrow pierced me through. When I raised my face, the class rep Orino-san was looking at me with the eyes one directed at a hopeless child.

Orino Shiori. An earnest honor student, a girl whose weak stomach was occasionally her weak point. Her appearance went back and forth somewhere between the lines of cute and pretty, I guess.

“Why were you tricked that easily, seriously.”

“His skillful speech led me on...”

“No, from what I’ve heard, he wasn’t skillful in the slightest.”

Before Orino-san who curtly cut me off, I could only shrink back.

Today morning, I was convinced the urn had exorcised away the evil spirits, stepping into the classroom with my tensions sky high.

“Good morning, Orino-san. Ah, hey, listen to this. Yesterday, a kind traveler sold me an urn. Thanks to that, the evil spirit possessing my house was cleansed away. Well, the hundred million yen was painful, but it was a precious urn, so it can’t be helped.”

I triumphantly bragged.

While I was talking, Orino-san’s complexion gradually worsened, in the end having lost its color entirely, “Kagoshima-kun. Could you explain it in detail...” She said coldly.

After that, Orino-san did her best to explain I had been tricked, but not wanting to accept my failing, “If you’re going to make fun of that monk, even if it’s you Orino-san, I won’t permit it!” I said in the sort of tone that might form irreparable rifts in intrapersonal relationships.

But in no time, I had lost the argument and was forced to accept what I never wanted to, the fact I had been scammed.

“... Well. Well well, well well well well.”

I slowly stood. Brushing aside my bangs, I pat my uniform straight as I spoke full of leisure.

“Well, well I did think it was a little strange.”

“Don’t have to act tough.”

“Urk... you’re wrong. I was thinking of everyone...”

“Don’t shift the responsibility.”

“Gnn...”

The usually kind Orino-san was kinda harsh. Perhaps she had concluded me to be a “Pamper him, and he’ll become hopeless” sort of man.

“Well, that being the case, this really isn’t a situation to laugh at,” Orino-san’s face turned serious. “That’s a bonafide case of fraud, and the sum was as it was. That man might try repeating the same means again. You’d better contact the police.”

“R-right. We can’t let him trick the good people of this town!”

“... And Kirishima-kun, stop recklessly trusting the stories of people you don’t know.”

“... Yes,” I gave a powerless nod. “So... umm, Orino-san. Could you not tell the others about this? Especially not Kurisu-chan...”

“Yeah? Of course, I don’t plan to spread it... but why?”

“No, there’s a limit to being pathetic, see. And I want to be a reliable senpai to Kurisu-chan.”

“... Kurisu-chan probably doesn’t have one iota of respect for you as a reliable senpai.”

Say what?

No, there’s no way that’s true.

Kurisu-chan always shows me a friendly smile. While that smile occasionally looks like it’s just social courtesy, it goes without saying that’s just my imagination.

“Anyways, this’ll be our little secret. Got it?”

“Hmm, our little secret, huh...”

For a slight instant, Orino-san’s expression loosened. But she soon pulled it

tight and spoke with the same earnest face as ever.

“Got it. Then we should set up some countermeasures, the two of us.”
“Yep.”

There the bell rung, the strategy meeting was put on hold. We took our own seats, and just before the chime was about to end, the classroom door opened to pave the way for our homeroom teacher, Hoshikawa-sensei.

“Ahem, I have a new friend to introduce to you today.”

With some rough greetings, Hoshikawa-sensei said such a thing. The class was suddenly astir. A boy, or a girl? There were conversations breaking out here and there. A new friend, meaning a transfer student. Now normally, I’d be as interested as the average person, but I wasn’t in the mood. My mood was too blue through the loss of a hundred thousand yen.

“Yeah, yeah, settle down. Well then, Kikyouin-san, come in.”

As Hoshigawa-sensei said that, a single girl appeared at the classroom door. My eyes were immediately drawn to her blonde hair. Rather than cleanly dyed or natural, it looked like a darker pigment had been drained away, more pale than bright. Her blond hair was bunched into one at a high point. The look in her eyes was a little harsh. Alongside the frown she carried on her mouth, it made for a strong-willed impression. Still sour-faced, she stood on the podium.

“Then please introduce yourself.”
“Yes.”

With a short answer, the transfer student picked up a stick of chalk and wrote her name on the blackboard.

Kikyouin Yuzuki

What lovely penmanship. There's no doubt she was versed in calligraphy, I'm sure the whole class was thinking.

"Kikyouin Yuzuki. Let's get along."

Putting the chalk down and turning to us, Kikyouin-san said with a terribly bored voice. At the very least, from that voice, she didn't show much of a desire to get along with anyone. More that she just added it on because it was part of the template of a self-introduction.

"Kikyouin moved here from Kyoto," In a sullenly silent Kikyouin-san's place, Hoshigawa-sensei added on. "Everyone treat her well. Also, Orino, Kagoshima." "Yes," "Yes" Orino-san and I raised our hands. "Those two are our class's rep and vice rep. If anything happens, go to them." "Yes."

Once again, Kikyouin-san simply gave a business-like reply. Moving just her eyes, she looked over the classroom. Slowly... her eyes stopped on me. The moment our eyes met, she winced just a bit. I wonder why?

Could it be we've met before? No, I doubt it. She's quite an impression-leaving girl, if I met her, there's no way I'd forget.

[IMAGE GOES HERE]

While I pondered over it, Kikyouin-san took her eyes off me and reverted to her original expression face.

The transfer student Kikyouin-san was an exceptionally nonchalant person. When homeroom was over, a great many of our classmates went up to her to ask her a great many questions. But she simply evaded them all, an expressionless look on her face.

While she didn't make an unpleasant face, she blatantly took on an unpleasant

attitude.

Perhaps her, “leave me alone” aura had an effect, as what would be a festive event to the students, the appearance of a transfer student, was over before it started.

Regardless of that, during the midday break, Orino-san and I pushed desks together to eat lunch.

If you’re asking why I was eating lunch with Orino-san, the reason was simple and clear.

So I could have some of her lunch.

... There should be a limit to being pathetic, me.

Normally, I’d buy bread at the school store, but having lost my current living expenses, my financial situation was terribly harsh.

“Hah,” I leaked a sigh of admiration. “Your cooking is as tasty as ever.”

“Y-you think? Thank you.”

“The white rice is especially tasty. When it comes to Japan, it’s got to be rice.”

“... Kagoshima-kun, you’re just generally bad at praising people.”

Orino-san was fed-up. Crap. I guess there’s no point in praising her white rice.

“But it really is amazing that you woke up in the morning to cook a bento.”

I tried following through as I gazed over her bento once more. Not a single bit of frozen food, a girly lunch-box filled with that hand-made feel.

“If you do it every day, you just get used to it. In my case, cooking’s like a hobby. I often make my own dishes.”

“Ah, I get you, I get you. Making up dishes sure is fun. I’m often pursuing my own unique flavor.”

“... I’m sorry, please don’t group us together.”

She made an extremely reluctant face. That was the face of a painter whose painting was compared to an infant’s scribble.

Hmm. This is a surprising thing I only found out about recently, but apparently, I’m what the world commonly refers to as having no sense of taste.

It’s a bit complex, but I’ve started to think, “Isn’t it actually a charm point?”
A selling point of my positive self.

“Now then,” with the meal over and the bento put away, Orino-san spoke.

“About the man who scammed you, let’s put some thought into it.”

“... You’re right.”

The fun lunchtime almost made me forget, but I was currently in an incredible pinch. I shouldn’t avert my eyes from reality.

... Ah, I want to look away. Can’t I have a bit of escapism?

“When tomorrow comes, Do you think the spirit of the lake will pop up and ask, ‘did you drop this gold hundred million yen, or this silver hundred million yen?’ so we can all live happily ever after?”

“Quit dreaming... er rather, what even is a gold hundred million yen?”

Think about it seriously, she scolded me, so I thought some.

“... But I don’t think there’s much we can do besides contacting the police, realistically speaking.”

“Right... but at the current stage, we have too little information Did you find out the person’s name or anything?”

“For argument’s sake, I did get curious and ask...”

“And?”

“He said it’s not a name worth giving.”

“And then?”

“I thought he was a modest and cool person.”

“Idiot.”

Chck. My heart was wounded again.

Ah, but when Orino-san calls me an idiot, it actually doesn’t feel very bad. Since I’ve gotten to the point of thinking that, perhaps I’m already beyond salvation.

“If you want, I can put in a word to the police. I know a few people who know a few people. But even if it’s possible, I don’t really want to have to explain the reason to them...”

“Wait, Orino-san, You have that authority?”

“Ah, I-I don’t, no way!”

While for a brief moment, Orino-san let off the air of someone in an organization with a deep connection to the place, what’s more, a big shot with a relatively high place in that organization, as she hastily waved her hand, she looked like no more than an ordinary high school girl.

As usual, Orino-san ran her mouth incomprehensibly from time to time.

“... Hah. So the doors are shut.”

I slumped over the desk.

“But before all of that, I need to secure food expenses. From tomorrow, no from today night, I wonder what I’m going to eat to live...”

“U-Um, about that.”

When I held my head, Orino-san raised her voice.
Her cheeks a little red, she bashfully spoke.

“Just for a while, I could make your—”

“Hey.”

A cool voice barged into the conversation.
When I turned, the one there was the transfer student Kikyouin-san.

“You, come with me.”

Still sour, she looked at me with cold eyes.

“Who, you mean me?”

“Hurry up. I want to get it over before lunch break ends.”

Regardless of my answer, Kikyouin-san turned on her heels and walked off.

“Ah, wait a second.”

I hurriedly stood from my seat, following behind her for the time being.

“Wait, Kikyouin-san,” Orino-san said. “Is there something you don’t get? In that case, I’ll go with you. I’m class rep, so—”

“Quiet.”

At that unrestrained word, “Wha-” Orino-san’s expression hardened.

“I don’t need yer meddlin’. I—” She pointed at me, “—have business with that one.”

“What do you mean meddling!? When I’m trying to...”

“That’s whatcha call meddlin’.”

“... And what business do you even have with Kagoshima-kun?”

“What? Are you his girlfriend or something?”

To the question she irritably spat out, Orino-san’s face turned red.

“I-I’m not...”

“Then this has nothin’ to do with ya. Go away.”

Kikyouin-san started off again. “Look, you hurry up too,” she urged me on, so still not knowing what was going on, I tagged behind.

The place Kikyouin-san took me was the rarely-used area behind the gym. As for why she knew where it was when she was supposed to have just transferred in today, “I spent the first half of lunch break looking for a spot,” apparently.

“As long as we can be alone, anywhere would be fine.”

She said flippantly as she stared at me.

“ ... ”

And I was nervous stiff.

I gulped down my spit, frantically analyzing my current situation with a boiled-over face.

A girl called me out. Behind the gym. A place we could be alone.

... Hey no.

No matter what anyone thought, it had to be a confession.

In a moment, Kikyouin-san was going to confess to me.

“ ... ”

My heart soared to an idiotic height. I mean, it was my first ever confession! No, wait a second, on close inspection, that’s strange. Kikyouin-san just transferred in hours ago. We barely even conversed.

Thus there is only one conclusion I can make.

This is what the world calls—love at first sight.

... Wait. Could it be I was actually cool?

“You’re actin’ weird. It’s creepy.”

“W-what!?”

What cold words does she hold for the man she's fallen for?

Even so, she's pretty calm about all this, Kikyouin-san.

When she's going to confess to me, I couldn't feel anything like heightened emotion. Her complexion hadn't changed in the slightest. It was still a sickly pale.

Could it be this girl... she's used to this.

Dammit. To a veteran, a confession might be a trivial happening, but to a pure boy like me, it's a grand event that I'll remember for the rest of my life!

"... hfu."

I took a single deep breath. Calm down, you have to calm down, Kagoshima Akira. Be cool. While I'm really happy that Kikyouin-san came to like me, unfortunately, I have not come to like her.

I mean, I've only just met her.

It would be easy to lightly give the okay and start dating. But that's not the sort of relationship I'm looking for. Am I a wimp? A coward? Behind the times?

Hmph. Call me what you will.

When it comes to these sorts of things, I don't just want to give in. Love and affection, dating or not, I don't want to decide on those things so easily.

That's why—I'll properly turn her down.

"It might be surprisin' to hear this all 'f a sudden, but..."

Kikyouin-san spoke in a calm tone unthinkable for a confession.

"... Yeah."

I quietly nodded. My chest was full with apologetic sentiment. I'm sorry, Kikyouin-san. When you mustered up your courage (though it doesn't look like that at all) to confess to me.

Ah, good grief.

What a sinful man am I.

"You're possessed by evil spirits."

"Can we start as frie—huh?"

What did she just say, this girl?

An evil spirit...?

That was a term I had heard before. More specifically, yesterday morning.

“The ghosts of a couple who passed in a traffic incident. The couple’s getting’ along quite nicely, stuck to your back. Now they’re lookin’ mighty embarrassed.”

She was looking at me... no, at something behind me.

“They’re not really strong, so there shouldn’t be any real harm... but you at least feel a chill, aight? Was it hard to sleep last night?”

“No, not particularly...”

“That so. Good for you. Well, they’re better off passing on quick. Nothin’ good comes of lingerin’ in the world. I want to lay them to rest fast.”

“... Umm Kikyoin-san, what have you been talking about for...”

“Oh that. I see ghosts.”

She nonchalantly tossed it out light as a feather.

“In Kyoto, my family’s been onmyouji for generations. There’s this clan that carries the blood of that famous Abeno Seimei guy, and the Kikyoin house is a branch family. I’m the eldest daughter. You pickin’ up what I’m puttin’ down?”

“...”

“The reason I came to this town, to put it real simple, is for practical trainin’. Before I become an adult, it’s custom to get sent ‘round to sacred ground all over the place—that’s where there’re lots of ghosts and yokai by the way.”

“...”

I felt an ominous sweat flow down my back.

It kinda felt like the confession was still a confession nonetheless, but she just confessed something even more amazing to me. She suddenly went on about seeing ghosts, and being an onmyouji.

“O-oh really. That sounds amazing.”

I said. But, well, I didn’t fully swallow down what she was telling me. Fool me once, they say.

I went through some pain yesterday. I’ve properly learned from experience. Perhaps inferring something from seeing me pull back a bit,

“Well, whether you believe me or not doesn’t really matter. Doesn’t change

what I'm doing."

Kikyouin-san said bluntly, lightly exhaling a sigh.

In my head, there had been a slight possibility of, "She was so nervous when she tried to confess, that she started running her mouth on ghosts and other incomprehensible things," but it seems that line was thin.

Still, so it's come to being possessed by an evil spirit...

... Ah, those events from yesterday quickly developing into a trauma came back to me.

"I'm going to send the ghosts possessin' ya to heaven real quick, so stay still a minute."

"I can't pay you any money!"

I cried out in my poverty.

"Right now, I really have no money! I can't even feed myself! If you want to trick someone, please choose someone with more money!"

"... Hah? What are you talkin' about, dude?"

"You may want to trick me, but I won't go down so easily! It's that! Yeah, that! My dad is a lawyer, so there's hell waiting for you if you scam me!"

I put up a bluff with all my might. That was all my might.

"Seriously, what's up with you all of a sudden? What, did you fall for a phony exorcist scam or somethin'?"

"W-what!? What might you be talking about, young girl?"

I brute forced my way through with all my might. That was all my might.

"Anyways,"

Finding my dawdling irritating, Kikyouin-san swept back her blond hair and exhaled a large breath.

"I'm not takin' your money, just stop moving."

"Really? Can I take your word for it? Don't demand anything later. My dad's an international lawyer, so I'm really knowledgeable about that sort of thing—"

"Ah, god! You're persistent! Just shut up and stand still!"

As she snapped and shouted at me, I reflexively stood at attention.

Kikyouin-san slickly pulled a sheet of paper from her pocket. That white rectangular paper was joined with letters of which I couldn't tell what language they belonged to.

With a smack, she slapped the paper onto my forehead.

"Oww. Hey, can't you be a little—"

"Quiet."

"... Yes ma'am."

She's a scary one. Completely in her own world, that one.

In various ways, she's scary.

Gazing at her as she closed her eyes and began concentrating, I faintly thought. She said money wasn't her objective, which means... right.

She's just saying she can see ghosts to draw everyone's attention...

Come to think of it, there was one of those in my elementary school, a girl who was desperately trying to become popular. I'm sure there's at least one in every school. But if she was still saying it after getting to high school, that's a little harsh. I can only say she's setting up her character completely wrong.

"Ssuu..."

Kikyouin-san calmly sucked in a breath.

"Rin • Byou • Tou • Sha—"

Whoah! She's started saying some convincing-sounding things!

Before my eyes, she started moving a hand with two fingers stuck up in circles.

"Kai • Jin • Retsu • Zen—Jyou!"

Wringing out her voice, she stopped her hand smack dab in front of the paper on my head. Just what was she doing, I thought, but as Kikyouin-san was simply so serious, I couldn't say anything.

"... Okay, it's over."

Letting out a relieved breath, Kikyouin-san lowered her hand. At the same time, the talisman on my head peeled off, fluttering gently to the ground.

"The couples' ghosts successfully passed on. There really is nothin' good about being bound to this world, so that's good."

I did it, was the expression she made.

“Ah, you don’t have to do anythin’. I didn’t do the exorcism for your sake or anythin’. Having a possessed guy in the same class as me was just an eyesore.”
“...”

“I won’t say don’t tell anyone about this. You can spread it or do whatever you want. It’s not like anyone will believe you, and even if they do, they’ll just find me creepy.”

Seeya, she said.

After saying whatever she wanted, Kikyouin-san soon disappeared from the area behind the gym.

As the one left behind, I leaned my back against the concrete wall, worming my way down it to a squat on the ground.

“... That was painful.”

This was a cringe equal if not greater to the eighth grade syndrome cosplayer Kurisu-chan. I get being anxious after transferring schools, but there really is something up about saying you can see ghosts to get everyone’s attention. Well, compared to that phony exorcist scam, her lack of ill intent made her a hundred times better.

“...”

I turned my head to gaze over my shoulder.

I couldn’t see anything.

Kikyouin-san exorcised me, so even if there was something there, there’s no way I could see it, but even so, I couldn’t bring myself to believe there was a ghost on my own back up to a moment ago.

Well, sure enough, now that she’d brought it up, maybe my shoulders did feel a bit lighter—

“No! I-I can’t, no way!”

Getting into that train of thought was falling right into Kikyouin-san’s trap (?). My lightening shoulders was definitely the placebo effect!

I have to learn from experience.

Ghosts don’t exist!

“You’re making a long face there, Kagoshima.”

After school. Having come to the ComClub club room, I was playing fighting games with Kagurai-senpai. The round was over, and as I took a short rest, senpai asked with a worrying sort of teasing sort of voice. Gaming was Kagurai-senpai’s hobby and we would often play together after school. But the way Kagurai-senpai played was quite peculiar.

“Hah. I’m sure your worries ‘re on the level of your mommy finding your porn stash, right? Good grief, you’re a petty brat, you know that.”

“Hey now, Gakuta. Don’t tease Kagoshima too much. Just because you’re mad he beat you.”

“Hah? What ‘re you talking about, Monyumi? I’m not mad at all. Yeah, I ain’t mad at all!”

“... Who’s the petty one here?”

“Shut it! Now kid, we’re going again!”

“Hmm. I’m sorry, Kagoshima. Making you tag along with this guy.”

“..... Well, I don’t really mind.”

As always, Kagurai-senpai’s ventriloquism level was so high it was a little scary, I thought as I moved the joystick to select a character. The stuffed animal Gakuta was resting on Kagurai-senpai’s lap, and lifting up his small hands from behind, she used them to manipulate the controller. Twice the effort, half the returns.

“Mnn! Take that! Hah!”

Raising shouts, Gakuta-kun violently, repeatedly struck in button commands with his soft hands, while Kagurai-senpai looked over him tiredly. No many times I saw it, it looked like Kagurai-senpai was just placing her hands on an autonomous Gakuta-kun, but that’s what you call an optical illusion.

“So anyways, Kagoshima.”

The match ended (with my win again), “Ngaa!” Gakuta-kun painfully writhed, and while producing his cries of anguish, Kagurai-senpai overlapped her own voice on top.

To think she can do two voices at once, she’s already a world-level ventriloquist.

Maybe I should get her signature before she takes the world by storm.

“Why are you making that depressing face? It doesn’t suit you.”

“Even I have my worries you know.”

“Hmm. I heard there was a transfer student in your class today, but could it be related to that?”

“I’m surprised you knew about that.”

“Who do you think I am?”

Hmhmm, she smiled proudly.

Come to think of it, almost as if she had arrived from a distant future, Kagurai-senpai boasted a tremendous affinity with computers. The management of Adatara High School’s data was also left in her hands.

Meaning there was nothing she didn’t know in regards to this school.

“As you’ve guessed, it’s about the transfer student.”

I spoke only about today’s lunch break. It was embarrassing to bring up my purchase of a hundred thousand yen urn, so I would hide it from everyone apart from Orino-san, who learned by coincidence.

“Oh? For you to sink your claws when she’s just transferred in, despite your cowardly appearance, you’re surprisingly assertive.”

“... What part of that story gave you that impression?”

“Hey, I’d give to be in your shoes. By Heisei Literature, transfer student is an exceedingly important trait to possess. If she was coming, she should’ve just transferred into my class.”

“...”

Kagurai-senpai referred to Otaku Culture as Heisei Literature, pouring an abnormal amount of affection into them. When she was a pretty woman, she played her share of dating sims and ero games.

“I’d be perfectly fine if she was just a cute transfer student... how should I put it, she’s a girl with more than a thing or two going on.”

Like ghosts, yokai, onmyouji, and the like.

I didn’t believe in such irregular existences.

The lady in a strange suit I met in Gentle Breeze Park told me not to.

“Oh, that’s right, Kagoshima. I have something important to talk to you about.”

“What is it?”

“Do you want to join a club?”

“By a club, do you mean the ComClub”

Kagurai-senpai gave a certain nod.

ComClub, properly termed the Computer Club. While it used to have around ten members, working on program and computer modification and production, the returnee Kagurai-senpai entered, and as a result, every single member resigned. At present, senpai was the only one left.

“I don’t really mind joining... but why all of a sudden? Did something happen?”

“Yes. The truth is, the student council’s been taking the initiative lately, moving to close down clubs with too few members. This club’s become a target.”

“Hmm. The student council, is it?”

The reason the ComClub was recognized with only one member was thanks to Kagurai-senpai’s management of school security, but in the end, that was nothing more than an exception. I’m sure there were people out there who didn’t take favorably to it.

“Good grief, what is up with this school’s student council!”

Kagurai-senpai breathed heavily. She was taking heavy offense. When it came to the ComClub’s continued activity, I’m sure she feuded with the student council.

“By Heisei literature, a student council is supposed to be a captivatingly charming, merry bunch... but those guys, just how lacking in personality traits can they be... five people, and four of them boys? Are they even trying!? Who’s going to pick up a story like that!?”

... Though the direction of her rage was strange.

Sure enough, our student council is filled with plain people.

Sure enough, the student councils of manga and anime are usually fun-loving groups.

Well, let’s just put that aside.

“So you’re telling me you might lose the use of this room?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“... That’s a little sad. This place is ridiculously comfortable. It’s on the top floor, so it’s even got a good view, and because of the computers, it’s even been furnished with good air conditioning.”

“Personally, I can’t bear to lose this base. It took quite some effort to modify this PC to easily connect to the B3 world. I had to arrange the other computers to run in parallel—”

“B3 World? What’s that?”

“Aaah! I-It’s nothing! Nothing at all, don’t worry about it.”

“Is that so.”

If it’s nothing, I’d better not worry about it.

“Anyways, I want to gather personnel and make this a proper club. If I do, I doubt anyone will complain. Of course, you can leave all our club activities as the computer club to me. I doubt high schoolers of this era ca—no, I mean. Yeah. Well, let’s just leave it at that.”

“I’m fine. But what are you going to do about the other members?”

The number of people for a proper club was supposed to be five. Counting me and Kagurai-senpai, we’re lacking another three.

“Orino and Kurisu will work out,” Kagurai-senpai said matter of factly. “I don’t recall those two being in a club.”

Orino-san and Kurisu-chan were on considerably friendly terms with Kagurai-senpai. It was quite often that the four of us-me included-used the ComClub room for study meets.

“That’s true, but until you actually ask them...”

“With those two, if I make a serious request, there’s no way they’ll refuse.”

She said with a fearless smile.

... This person plans to abuse Orino-san and Kurisu-chan’s good nature.

“So what about the last one?”

“I don’t care who it is. Kagoshima, do you have any ideas?”

“Ah, I wonder. Everyone around me’s already in a club.”

By the way, our school prohibits overlap. The last member will inevitably have to be part of the go-home club.

“I see. Hmm. Carrying out an advertising campaign is a pain, but hunting down someone who isn’t in a club is also a pain...”

Kagurai-senpai crossed her arms in thought, but, “Ah, that right,” she soon hit upon something.

“We’ve got one. A person who’s definitely not in a club.”

“Who’s that?”

“Transfer student.”

Well that’s true. Having only transferred in today, I highly doubted Kikyousan was in a club yet. After classes ended, she went straight home alone.

“You’re already on good terms with the transfer student, right? This is what you call a godsend. Go and ask her, why don’tcha.”

“I’m telling you, we’re not on good terms.”

“Just ask and see where it goes. Transfer students are there to be gotten along with. There are starving children in the world who can’t be friends with transfer students no matter how much they want to. If you’re a man, getting along with a transfer student should be no trouble at all.”

Just how much romance did she find in the label of transfer student? Kagurai-senpai’s dating sim brain was reaching a bit of a dangerous level.

“Transfer student is a wonderful trait that signifies new stimulus and dramatic developments to come in the story. The antithesis of the transfer student is the childhood friend. The bond of always being together, and the sadness of being so close yet going unnoticed, on top of—”

“Hmm. That’s amazing.”

As she went on and on, I arbitrarily ignored her prattle. Thinking it was a round time to go home, I began preparing to leave.

“Well, if it’s childhood friends, I’ve got one of those.”

“Meaning tsundere is a mutable concept that changes with the times—”

Silence.

The words I nonchalantly threw out brought her words to a sudden spot. When

I turned, her eyes were open wide, her mouth opening and closing in silence.

“W-what’s wrong?”

“... You, what did you just say? You have a... childhood... friend...?”

“Y-yes, well,”

Hah! She raised a voice like a shriek, looking up to the heavens.

“Childhood friend is a trait so realistically unobtainable, it can’t even be compared to transfer student... you mean to tell me you’ve been keeping humanity’s greatest treasure... no, humanity’s strongest weapon locked away...”

“You talk about them like they’re nuclear warheads...”

“In Heisei Literature, the childhood friend’s sole regular appearance is in the phrase, ‘cute childhood friends don’t actually exist in reality’ used to resolve the absolute complex held by the youth of the era. And yet... d-do you even realized the blessed environment you must live in...”

“... O-oh?”

She bit on so hard, I pulled back a bit.

Kagurai-senpai’s affinity towards childhood friends was several tens of times that of her love for transfer students.

“... Eh? What are you? What the hell are you? A transfer student comes to your class, you’ve got a childhood friend. What the hell are you? God? Are you god or something?”

“...”

She was kinda getting into a really annoying tension.

The boys in school think of her as some ice-cold cool beauty, but when you talk to her, it’s all too easy to tell that’s nothing more than an illusion.

She was funnier and more friendly than her appearance might suggest.

“Oy, Kagoshima. Is that childhood friend cute?”

“... No rather than cute, I’d say cool.”

“Hmm, so a tomboy type.”

“? No, not a tomboy, just a boy.”

“... What?”

She blankly opened her mouth.

“Um, uh... what? I’m sorry, Kagoshima. I was sure I’d studied the language of this era, but I cannot comprehend the meaning behind the words that just came from your mouth. Can you please repeat them?”

“As I said, he’s a boy. Well, he’s quite a mature guy, so maybe more of a man.”

There, Kagoshima-senpai made a face as if she had listened in to some unknown language.

“K-Kagoshima... could it be that your childhood friend is male...?”

This can’t be, tell me it isn’t so, she seemed desperate.

“Yes.”

But I plainly nodded.

“... A childhood friend of the same... gender...”

She held her head with both hands, ruffling her orderly long hair into a mess. Like a scholar who’d just had everything they’d ever learned negated.

“... Kagoshima, are you gay?”

“I’m not! Why did it come to that!?”

“I mean, you’re a man and you have a male childhood friend... there’s no other possibility.”

It did seem Kagurai-senpai’s dating sim brain was long passed the point of no return. Well, I’d had my brushes with the subculture a bit, so it’s not like I couldn’t see where she got the childhood friend must be the opposite gender train of thought.

“In the first place, childhood friend isn’t a gendered term.”

“No, no, just think about it, and wait, I mean, I mean, I mean, I mean, I mean, you know... you know, right... I mean I mean I mean...”

She started fretting like a child.

She really was in an annoying mood.

“Hah... it’s fine. I was an idiot for placing any hope in reality.”

Breathing a deep sigh, Kagurai-senpai sat in the seat of her favorite desktop PC.

“Cute childhood friends only exist in games...”

She flicked on the PC and started up a dating sim.

“... I’ve said it again and again, but I’ll say it again. Kagurai-senpai. Please play those games where no one’s watching.”

“I refuse. I’m not doing anything embarrassing.”



She stuck out her chest and said it with pride. What wasted manliness.

“Since you’re here, want to play together, Kagoshima? I’ll educate you to the

point you'll never be able to say the words male childhood friend again."

"... I'll refrain. Please enjoy your dating sim alone."

Just how awkward would that be, playing it together?

"Well then, Kagoshima. That male childhood friend of yours, just how long has he been a childhood friend?"

"... Pardon?"

"As I was saying, what sort of childhood friend is he? From elementary school, or maybe kindergarten? Or could it be your parents were friends, so you knew him since you were a baby? What's the pattern?"

"Don't call it a pattern."

But... huh?

Since when? When was it again?

"... I've never thought about it."

"Mn? Never thought about it? Can something like that happen? Even if you don't know the precise date, you should have a general idea, right?"

"That's, right. I think so too..."

I really never thought about it.

He... by the time I noticed it, we were just friends as if it were natural.

I can't remember a time when we weren't friends.

Huh?

When did I become his friend again?

When... did I first meet him again?

If you go in an unpopular direction from my house, and turn down an unpopular street, you reach a slightly run-down shrine. I'm not serious about religion, so I have no idea what sort of god lives there.

Passing through the tori gate, dyed even redder by the evening sun, I entered the grounds of the shrine. The area was exceptionally quiet, only the rustling sound of the wind on leaves entered my ears.

After returning home, I peddled my bike to the shrine.

I knew if I came here...

"Ah, as I thought."

As I walked along the stone pavement, I spotted a single man sitting on the shrine's slight staircase. Wearing a dark gray kinagashi close to black, a head of light gray hair close to white. Without any distinct color, he held a vague, monochrome appearance. He folded his long legs, reading the thin paperback resting on his lap. Noticing me, he lifted his face.

"Hey, Akira."

He said with a smile. Bitter and sweet, a smile that suited him.

"Been a while, Kai."

Giving a light answer, I sat a step lower than him.

Shinose Kai.

My childhood friend.

We didn't have any particular common point, not the same kindergarten, or elementary school, the same cram school or club, but I... was his friend by the time I noticed it.

Kai was often at the shrine. I thought I might be able to meet him as I made the trek, and as if he had been waiting for me, here he was.

Putting his favorite bookmark in the book, he flipped it shut.

"Keep reading. You were at a good part, weren't you?"

"No it's fine. It's more fun talking to you than reading books."

He sounded like he was joking, but simple as I was, I was happy even if it was a joke.

"Hey Kai. What sort of god is in this shrine."

"This is an Inari Shrine, so Oinari-sama lives here."

"Oinari-sama? What's that? Does it have anything to do with Inari sushi?"

"Inari's a kitsune. You can see a fox statue over there, can't you?"

"Ah, your right."

Just as Kai said, a little distant from the gate, there were two fox statues.

"By the way, it's called Inari sushi because it uses a kitsune's favorite fried tofu."

"I see. As expected of you. You're as knowledgeable as ever."

"You're just too unknowledgeable, Akira."

At his mischievous smile, I gave a sullen response.

“Well sorry for being ignorant.”

“Quit sulking. You’re not a kid,” Kai smiled wryly. “It’s not like ignorance is a bad thing. There are loads of things in this world you’re better off not knowing.”

“Ignorance is a bliss, you mean?”

“That’s right. For the really important things, it’s fine as long as only god knows.”

“Only god knows?”

“Yep, only god knows.”

He said lightly with a bittersweet smile.

At times, Kai would say things I didn’t really get. Perhaps he meant for a complicated nuance I was unable to comprehend, and perhaps he didn’t mean anything at all.

It’s just, I didn’t hate listening to him like this.

And we talked about trivial things. The manga I got hooked on lately, and the books he’d been reading. I unveiled the one-shot gag of inevitable laughter I thought up yesterday, and Kai made a troubled face at it, so on and so forth.

“Kikyouin...? Akira, is that true?”

When I told him a transfer student came from Kyoto, Kai was a little surprised.

“It’s true. Do you know anything about Kikyouin-san?”

“No. I don’t know anything about that transfer student individually. But I do know the name Kikyouin. They’ve got somewhat of a name in Kyoto. The Tsuchimikado house carries the blood of the great onmyouji Abe Seimei. And one of their branch families is the Kikyouin House.”

It was the same as what Kikyouin-san said. Something about carrying the blood of Abe Seimei and being a branch family. That part of it wasn’t her made-up setting, apparently.

“Umm, so what happens if she has this Abe Seimei-san’s blood? Does that give her some amazing power?”

“Not really. That shouldn’t do much. But it might not just be his blood she carries on.”

Kai sounded intentionally elusive.

“The Tsuchimikado House makes money through fortune telling and feng shui, but I don’t hear too many good things about the Kikyouin House. Plenty of bad things, mind you.”

“What sort of bad things?”

“The clan possessed by a fox.”

His tone lowered a bit.

“Only girls are born into the kitsune-cursed Kikyouin House, and every time the generations change, the baby born’s hair grows closer to gold... is the rumor that’s going round.”

Kikyouin-san’s hair color.

It was definitely blond.

“... A curse? That sounds kinda out of place. Do they still have those in this day and age?”

“Time’s got nothing to do with it. No matter how long it goes on, these sorts of stories don’t disappear. As long as humans exist, ghosts and youkai aren’t going away.”

As he said it conclusively, I couldn’t help but ask.

“Then do you believe that ghosts are out there?”

“Hm? Hmm, let’s see. Maybe not.”

Kai said, in an especially hinting tone.

I see. So they really aren’t. If Kai says it, then it must be true.

“For example, do you know about the youkai called the Zashiki Warashi?”

“Yeah. Well, that’s a relatively famous youkai after all.”

“How much do you know?”

“Umm, it latches onto a house, and brings happiness to the people living there or something...”

And also—

When you’ve got children playing with one another, before you know it, there’s one too many. When someone must have slipped in, the kids are all faces you’ve seen before. That one extra is the Zashiki Warashi.

... I think.

Meaning a youkai who becomes a friend before you've realized it.

I wonder if it's that sort of thing.

"Okay, as long as you get that much, it's enough. That makes matters quick."

Giving a satisfied nod, Kai went on.

"The Zashiki Warashi is a folkloristic device born to address the 'inclination of wealth' within a community."

... He lost me.

Picking that up from my expression, Kai rephrased it simpler.

"To put it really simply, the question 'why is his house making so much more money than me' was answered with, 'because there must be a Zashiki Warashi living there'. It didn't matter what, they just wanted an answer."

"Oh, I see."

"The Zashiki Warashi is a north-eastern youkai, but wherever you look, you can find youkai of similar origin. Possessed by a kitsune, or possessed by an inugami. Those so-called possessions are generally the same story."

"I see, I get it."

Thanks to Kai explaining it as fervently as if he was talking about himself, I could finally understand.

"You're telling me... Youkai don't exist."

In the end, they were all born in an age where science hadn't developed. They were born to explain incomprehensible, unreasonable situation. Those were youkai.

"I don't know about that."

But Kai vaguely muddled his words.

"Now that science is around, yeah, you can declare youkai don't exist. But even in this era being taken over by science, man continues to believe in god, to fear the youkai. He prays to the Buddha and scorns the devil. Even if there's no scientific proof, as long as their name brings an influence to a human heart, then don't you think that's the same as saying they're still around?"

“You mean... like for example, how the rent goes down for a room a suicide happened in, and how there are still people who write youkai and onmyouji-themed manga, that sort of thing?”

When I sought confirmation, he quietly lowered his head.

“... But in the end, that means they don’t exist, right? Humans just made them up, then danced to their tune, or rather...”

“That part’s the same as science.”

“As science?”

“When it was unraveled by human hands, it gradually extends far beyond their reach, both science and the occult. Just as a child won’t grow up as their parents want them to, that sort of thing.”

I kinda understood, but really didn’t.

“Did I confuse you? Well truth be told, you’re exactly right. Youkai don’t exist. No matter the influence they bring to the human heart, their existence is mere fiction. While real individuals, organizations, events may have been related, they themselves are not real.”

Saying that, Kai smiled. He smiled the smile an adult uses to soothe a child.

“There are no ghosts or youkai. So it’s not possible that a Zashiki Warashi became your friend before you knew it.”

“... I see. Yeah. You’re right.”

Hearing that from Kai, all the doubts in my mind cleared up.
There are no ghosts or youkai in the world.
So both Kikyouin-san and that traveling monk had to be fakes.

“... It’s getting dark. It’s time I went home.”

Lifting myself up, I descended the stairs and started walking off.
After a light parting, I turned my back to Kai.
In the end, I never told him hundred thousand yen was cheated out of me.
I didn’t want to worry him, I was too embarrassed to say.
... Erk. But what do I do about today’s dinner...

“Akira!”

When I turned at the voice from behind me, Kai tossed something over. I somehow managed to catch, and when I looked at it in my hand, it was a five-hundred-yen coin.

“I’ve paid you back for the five hundred yen I borrowed the other day.”

“Did I ever lend you money?”

“Huh? Maybe I made a mistake. Whatever. Then I’ll lend it to you. Go buy yourself a meal or something.”

“Ah, but...”

“Pay me back next time you have some money.”

“... Haha. Thanks.”

I could only laugh.

Before my wise childhood friend, it looks like everything I tried to hide was seen through.

Chapter 2: Playing Exorcist

“Why in Christ’s name, are you possessed again!”

The first thing that came out of Kikyouin-san’s mouth was a cry of surprise. Early morning the next day. Just as I entered the classroom, I ran right into Kikyouin-san. Recalling her playing exorcist the other day, I hesitated over whether I should call out to her or not, but ignoring her wouldn’t be much better, I thought, so I said an overly normal, “Morning.” Yet...

“This has to be a lie... two days in a row... what even are you...?”

According to Kikyouin-san, I was possessed by another evil spirit, apparently.

“Does this mean my exorcism was a failure... no, that can’t be. The ghosts from yesterday properly passed on, so...” She stared straight at the area around my shoulders. “Yeah, it really is a different ghost from yesterday. He’s been possessed anew...”

“... Look here.”

I was getting a little fed up, so I finally said something about it.

“Can you stop pointlessly scaring people like that? I’ll be your friend even if you don’t do this sort of thing. Ah, if you want, would you like to exchange email addresses?”

“Quiet for a sec.”

Refusing my good will, like an appraiser observing a curio brought in, she sent a serious look to my shoulders.

“Have you always had an easy-to-possess constitution?”

“Again with the yous. I have a name, and it’s Kagoshima Akira...”

“Answer the question.”

“... Yes.” I nodded. I mean, she’s scary. “Let’s see, I really don’t know anything about being possessed or not. I thought I’d been living a life relatively irrelevant to that sort of thing.”

“Right. But bein’ possessed by a different ghost right after an exorcism is usually

impossible. It sometimes happens to people with ridiculously high spiritual energy, but yours doesn't look like anything special... which means..."

Crossing her arms, she thought to herself. A little while later, "Hey," she raised her head.

"After today's classes, can I go to your house? 'n wait, I'm going just to let you know."

She said something outrageous.

"P-pardon?"

"You didn't hear me? I said I'm goin' to your house,"

"I heard, but... but why?"

"Because I can't think the cause lies with you. Now that it's come to this, the place with the highest probability of being the underlyin' factor is your house."

"No, that's not what I meant."

Why was she going as far as telling a lie like that to come to my house, was what I wanted to ask. What is it. Does this girl have a thing for me after all?

"Around where's your house?"

"Umm, do you know Gentle Breeze Park? Ah, strictly speaking, it's a former park. Right now, it's a large off-limits area... close to there."

Though when she'd just transferred, there's no way she could know. I thought, but surprisingly, Kikyoun-san gave a satisfied nod.

"So over there. That's relatively close."

"I'm surprised you knew. Kikyoun-san, didn't you just get here?"

"It is an onmyouji's duty to be versed in the lands they inhabit. I'm confident I know more about this town's layout than you."

I see, it did seem walking was her hobby.

"Alright, then at former-Gentle Breeze Park, after school... six I guess? We'll meet up. I have to get back to my place to assemble all the necessary items."

"What necessary items?"

"What I'll need for an exorcism. You might not be self-aware, but you're really in for it. Yesterdays was quite simple, but I have to do it for real today. Then six, okay."

One-sidedly declaring our parting, Kikyouin-san entered the classroom. And left in the hallway, I frantically turned the gears in my head. What exactly was Kikyouin-san's goal?

Luckily, yesterday night, I cleaned the place corner to corner in the hopes, 'there might be money dropped somewhere', so the house was extremely clean. Unlike with Orino-san and Kirisu-chan's last visit, I doubt I have to do anything about my porn.

By the way, the military gains of my, 'money dropped somewhere' strategy were seven hundred and twenty-three yen. The five hundred yen bill in the pocket of my winter pants was the largest contribution.

... That being the case, that didn't change the fact it was drops in a bucket. Thinking of how my next living expenses would come in three months, it brought tears to my eyes.

Aaaah.

If only coins would come out when you opened the shelves like an RPG. Will defeating a stray cat net me some EXP or gold?

"... Morning."

When I was considering animal abuse, a wild Orino-san appeared. Lightly puffing her face, she was making a displeased expression.

"What's wrong, Orino-san. Are you feeling ill?"

"... What were you talking so happily about with Kikyouin-san?"

"That? Ah, no, I wasn't particularly happy about it."

Rather, I got the feeling we were both fed up with one another, just barely keeping the conversation going. To think she thought we looked happy, Orino-san must have been watching from a considerable distance.

"Um, you see,"

Explaining from start to finish would be a pain, so I abridged it considerably.

"Kikyouin-san said she wants to come to my house."

"What!?"

Orino-san raised her voice. Opening her eyes wide, her entire face contorted into an expression of surprise.

“E-eh? Why does Kikyouin-san have to go to your house?”

“Who knows?”

That’s what I’d like to know. I’ve got no idea what her real MO is.

“S-so did you give the okay?”

“Yeah. Well, I think she can come over if she really wants to.”

“... What’s with that carelessness?”

Orino-san put her hand to her forehead. She was kinda making an extremely disappointed face. Was Kikyouin-san coming to my house of some great inconvenience to her?

“You’re kidding me... with yesterday and today... Just what is up with that girl...”

“... Orino-san, could it be you hate Kikyouin-san?”

“No, not particularly. I can’t say I hate her... though, I do think there’s something wrong with her attitude.”

Orino-san flowed her gaze into the classroom. At the end of it was Kikyouin-san, staring out the window with a sour look on her face. No classmates tried to talk to her. That was surely because Kikyouin-san was making it so. It wasn’t that she couldn’t be friendly with everyone, she just had no intention to do so. As if she didn’t have any expectations for her surroundings, those were the sort of eyes she made.

“So what’s Kikyouin-san coming over your house to do?”

“Who knows?”

Really, that’s what I want to know.

“As I recall, your parents are both out overseas, right... t-then you’ll be alone together, won’t you?”

Ah, come to think of it.

Yeah. Certainly, that’s probably not good.

“So, you know. I’ll go too... ah, wait.”

There, Orino-san made the expression of someone who recalled business they had no way of avoiding.

“... I get the feeling my stomach’s going to start hurting after school, so I’ll give it a rest...”

“You can tell!?”

You mean to tell me she gained a precognition of stomach pains before they even happened? Orino-san really is amazing. She hasn’t gone through a series of stomach pain-induced tardies and early departures for nothing.

“Anyways, just because you’re alone, don’t get any funny ideas.”

“I-I know.”

“And properly put away your porn.”

“Gfah!”

She’s still dragging that on.

I’m going to be teased on that for the rest of my life, aren’t I. Last time Orino-san came around to my house, she cleaned up the porn in my room, experiencing a terribly painful event for a lady. For some reason, she was far more motherly to me than my real mother.

“You can’t leave erotica out in the open just so you can enjoy seeing her troubled face like you did with me.”

“That wasn’t what I was thinking last time!”

I definitely didn’t feel that way! I don’t find enjoyment in such maniacal schemes! She’s overdramatizing events!

“Hmmm. I wonder. Kagoshima-kun, you look like the type who’d purposely get a female employee to check you out when buying porn to get a peek at the look on her face.”

“No, no way! H-huh? Orino-san, do you hate me...?”

By the way, a majority of the porn in my house is a hand-me-down from dad. I can count the times I bought them myself on one hand. What’s more, I bought them all at man-manned counters, never once getting a woman to check me out. Yes, I’m a wimp.

“... Hey, don’t tell me you’re angry?”

“I’m not angry.”

She sullenly puffed her cheeks. No matter what angle I looked from, I could

only see she was angry.

“No, you’re angry, right?”

“I’m totally not angry.”

“... No, but—”

“I’m super not angry.”

She turned her head away.

“I see. I’m glad you’re not angry.”

If she put a super on there, then I’m sure she’s fine. And now that I knew that Orino-san wasn’t angry, I felt relieved from the depths of my heart. I mean, she told me herself she’s not angry.

“.....”

But Orino-san kept sullenly glaring at me.

Around five-fifty, I left the house to pick up Kikyouin-san.

A few minutes down the twilight path, as I approached the meeting spot, former-Gentle Breeze Park, I caught sight of Kikyouin-san. Not in her uniform, she wore white and red Japanese clothing over her body.

I wonder if that onmyouji-ish attire was what she had to prepare for exorcism. She’s really into it. And there was another, smaller girl as well.

Blond hair that resembled Kikyouin-san’s, and a straw hat to snugly cover it up.

She wore a pure-white one-piece dress. Her eyes were pointed fox eyes.

On her neck—she wore an old-looking, rustic designed necklace.

The two whose only real resemblance was hair color seemed to be discussing something.

“Tamane-sama. I really don’t believe you had to come out personally. The spirit possessin’ him was the sorta low-grade ghost you can pick up anywhere, and I think I’ll be able to complete the exorcism alone without problem.”

“We did not come here out of worry for you, Yuzuki. But as your master, from time to time, I’ve got to see how far you’ve grown.”

“How long ‘re you goin’ to treat me like a child, seriously...”

“Hmph. From our eyes, you’ll always be a brat.”

“Of course, from your point of view, every human would have to be a child. ‘n wait, are you sure about this? I remember you were going to meet the local deity today.”

“We can do that anytime.”

“But if you’ve moved house, it’s better to meet the god of the region as soon as possible. That’s custom, after all...”

“Hah. We’re sure the measly god of this land hasn’t even noticed my arrival. This blasted collar has lowered our spiritual energy down to a tenth. We can’t even use my power without your Kikyouin House’s permission.”

“... I’m sorry.”

“Hmph. Yuzuki, it’s nothing for you to apologize about. The one who sealed us when we were but a newborn, was the Kikyouin House of many a generation ago. Well, we do have a personal grudge with your mother— Kikyouin Kaede, but that’s a separate issue. Just how many bitter experiences has she put us through...”

“... Mother’s just that sorta person. It’s like making toys of people is her reason to live. ‘Human? Youkai? No way there’s any equal or superior to me,’ I often hear her say.”

“So that ‘I am the one true god’ mentality of hers is still going strong... that one’s far more of a vixen than we.”

“Right... ah.”

There, Kikyouin-san finally noticed me.

“You’re late.”

“It’s still five minutes ahead of schedule. You’re just early.”

I approached the two? Who’s this girl? Before I could ask the question, the girl in the stray had took a step forward.

“Indeed,” with fox eyes, she looked up at me curiously. “So you’re the idiot with an idiotic face, an idiotic brain, and an idiotic penchant for being possessed Yuzuki was talking about.”

... Isn’t that a few too many idiots?

Kikyouin-san’s backbiting’s no joke.

“Our name is Tamane. You heard from Yuzuki, right?”

“... No, I haven’t heard anything...”

“What’s this, you don’t know? Then listen well and take these words to heart. For we are the only daughter of the famous and fair, gold-pelted, jewel faced, nine-tailed fox—Tamamo no m—”

“Wai-wait a sec, Tamane-sama!”

Kikyouin-san hurriedly covered the mouth of the young girl proudly giving her self-introduction. And they started whispering amongst themselves.

‘Tamane-sama. This guy’s a civilian, so please keep the fact you’re the nine tails’ daughter a secret.’

‘Hmm? And why is that? You didn’t hide the fact you’re an onmyouji from the man. Then there shouldn’t be a problem.’

‘That’s definitely true... but there are some folks who won’t take kindly to an onmyouji and youkai living under the same roof. You’re not supposed to declare it openly, right?’

‘Point taken. But we’re not in your house because we want to be. For the sake of our mother locked away in your family shrine, we have no say in the matter.’

‘I know... but even in the Tsuchimikado main house, only a select few know of your existence. We can’t thoughtlessly spread the information...’

‘So in the end, the Kikyouin house is a house of shadows. Compared to the main Tsuchimikados, there’s not a bloom in sight. Is the cost of employing us too great for you?’

‘.....’

‘... Don’t make that face. Ah, fine, we get it, we get it. We’ll leave it all to you. Do what you will.’

‘My dearest thanks.’

After a deep bow, Kikyouin-san turned in my direction.

“Umm, this girl is my... right. My little sister Tamane-sama. Isn’t that right, Tamane-sama?”

“Yeah, that’s right, that’s right. We’re Yuzuki’s little sister Tamane.”

Tamane-chan arbitrarily nodded.

To be quite blunt that self-introduction didn’t really enter my ears. Rather, a majority of it wasn’t reaching me. Because there was something that bothered me far more than that.

... This girl called Tamane-chan casually threw out the royal ‘we’.

She's seriously using it. It's the first time I've seen it in my life.

Whoah, this is harsh... I'm sure as a result of trying to stand out through elementary school, she made a grand mistake.

"What is it, whelp? Those eyes of pity?"

... She called me a whelp. It looks like she's well versed in the vocabulary of her part. I wasn't particularly irritated at being called a whelp, but when I considered the girl's future, taking on this attitude to her elders was definitely no good. So I decided to properly caution her on it.

"You know, the way you speak is extremely strange."

"... What?" Tamane-chan stared at me blankly. "What are you talking about? You say we speak funny? What part of it is strange?"

"And I'm telling you, that's just it. The way you call yourself we and—"

"Wai-what do you think you're saying!?" Kikyouin-san hurriedly cut in, "It's perfectly fine to refer to yourself as we."

"But Kikyouin-san. If you want her to cut it you, you'd better do it early. It might be cute now, but this girl will eventually grow into an adult."

"Q-quiet, I'm beggin' ya, keep quiet!"

"Oy, Yuzuki. What has this man been talking about? What's wrong with us referring to ourselves as we?"

"There's nothin' wrong at all! Nothin' strange about it at all!"

"Kikyouin-san, if you truly treasure your little sister, then even if it hurts her a bit, you should teach properly tell her what's strange."

"Seriously quieeett!"

She seemed kinda desperate.

Rather than being angry that her sister was being mocked, it felt like she was doing her best to make sure someone who definitely shouldn't be angered remained calm.

"... And wait, Kikyouin-san, why do you speak cordially to your little sister?"

"I-I'm free to do what I want! That's just how it works in our family!"

Hmm, I see. If it's a house rule, then there's nothing I can do about it. As I thought, famed houses that've been around a while have some strange rules. I thought over it as I shifted my eyes from the big to little sister. Giving up on

correcting her manner of speech, I decided to give a normal self-introduction.

“I’m Kahoshima Akira. Your big sis’s classmate. Pleasure to meet you.”

“Hmph. Though we’ve no mind to get familiar with a human such as yourself. We’ll at the very least permit you to address us by name. With respect and reverence, call us Tamane-sama.”

“Okay. Got it. Umm, then it’s Tamane, so I’ll call you Tama-chan.”

“Tama-chan, you say!?”

Tama-chan opened her large eyes in surprise.

“... Our years surpass eight hundred, and yet you would dare call us, a proud demon fox, Tama-chan...”

Her cheeks were twitching stiffly.

“... It does seem you’re in need of some discipline. Our energy may be sealed, but we wouldn’t be us if we couldn’t match blades with one so low in spiritual power as yourself...”

“Please calm down, Tamane-sama! Don’t take the words of an idiot seriously!”

“Unhand us! Unhand us, Yuzuki! We don’t take orders from you!”

As Tama-chan looked like she was going to come at me, Kikiyouin-san got her in a Nelson hold from behind. Seeing her behavior,

“Hey,”

I said a little harshly, lightly tapping Tama-chan’s head.

“Wwha!?” said Tama-chan.

“H-huh!?” said Kikiyouin-san.

Both their faces seemed to ask, what is this guy doing, is he alright in the head?

“You can call me an idiot all you want, but you can’t be that rude to your own big sister. Got it?”

I said something nice.

“I-Idiot! What are you doin’! Apologize to Tamane-sama at once.”

“Kikiyouin-san, she’ll never learn if you keep spoiling her. If you’re her big sister, then you must properly teach her how to interact with her elders.”

“Now practice what you preach!”

“... T-tttt-this is the first time we’ve suffered such a disgrace. You mean our head was poked by a human who isn’t even an onmyouji...? Oy, Yuzumi. This one’s dead. Any complaints?”

The flames of rage blazed up in the back of her fox eyes. In the next instant, her straw hat was blown away as if pushed by some force from below. The hem of her one-piece waved up as if something had sprouted from her behind.

“Wait, Tamane-sama! Your ears and tail!”

Kikyouin-san anxiously shifted her eyes between me and Tama-chan, but I couldn’t get what she was talking about.

Ears? Tail?

I couldn’t see that at all.

“I see. This guy’s spiritual power’s so low he can’t see,” Kikyouin-san found understanding on her own. “Anyways, calm down Tamane-sama. It is but the drivel of an idiot who knows not of what he speaks.”

“... Gnn.”

Somehow managing to swallow down her rage (though I’ve no idea why she was angry in the first place,) Tama-chan took a step back, and exhaled a big breath. After picking up the fallen straw hat, she put it back on.

“Yuzuki! We’re going to go home and sleep!”

“... Yes. Understood.”

“Hold it, Kikyouin-san. Are you sure? It’s getting dark, so it’s dangerous to send a little girl home alone.”

“...”

Just stop opening your mouth, said the eyes glaring at me. Why?

“Hmph.”

Giving a heartfelt displeased snort, Tama-chan turned her back to me and started walking off.

It really did worry me to let her return alone, but... well, she looks like a level-headed kid, so I guess she’ll be fine.

“Bye-bye Tama-chan. See you next time.”

When I waved my hand, Tama-chan executed a dynamic turn

“Fool—!”

She cried with a bright fed face.

“Fool—! Foooooool—! Your mother has an outie!”

After saying what she could, she disappeared as if melting into the evening shadows.

“Ahaha. You hear that? You think felt lonely about going home alone? She’s still just a kid, that Tama-chan.”

“...”

Kikyouin-san fell to her knees, her mouth sealed as if to say she no longer had the willpower to speak.

After Tama-chan returned, Kikyouin-san and I followed our original schedule, heading for my house just the two of us.

“Come to think of it, how old is Tama-chan?”

“How old was she again? She’s definitely over eight hundred... a usual demon fox takes over nine hundred years to grow nine tails, but Tamane-sama is...”

“...?”

“Ah! Umm. Yeah. She’s nine, nine years old.”

Nine, huh. So exactly how she looks.

“I’m an only child, so I’m jealous of people with brothers and sisters. Kikyouin-san, is it just you and Tama-chan? Do you have any other siblings.”

“None. I only have Tamane-sama...”

A shadow suddenly crossed Kikyouin-san’s face. Gazing at the darkening sky, she spun her words with a sorrowful expression.

“My parents were busy. I was pretty much raised by Tamane-sama. How to use an amulet, how to walk the uho, and the nine cuts, Tamane-sama taught me all of them...”

“...”

She was raised by her little sister.

Just how unreliable of a big sister must she be? She looks strong will, but is she surprisingly weak in the family?

“I’m truly thankful to Tamane-sama... I heard she even changed my diapers for me...”

“Eh...”

Even I couldn’t let that one by. I was struck dumb. My voice shook in abject terror.

“... K-Kikyouin-san, you had your little sister changes your diapers...?”

Tama-chan is nine, so wouldn’t that have to be recent?

That would... totally have to be... that sort of play, right?

Whoa... whoa, whoa, whoa.

She just came out with something incredible.

Seeing me draw back, Kikyouin-san who had entered her own world was taken aback.

“Ah, no, y-you’re wrong! T-that’s not...”

“No, it’s fine... really. Yeah. Isn’t it fine? Even if you like that sort of thing... there are all sorts of people in the world...”

“Ah, god, you’re wrong! I’m telling you Tamane-sama changed my diaper was back when I was a baby.”

“Eh? But at that time, the nine-year-old Tama-chan hadn’t been born, right?”

“... That’s...”

“That’s?”

“... Yeah, that’s right! I have my little sister change my diapers! You got anything to say about it!?”

She snapped. As she turned red to her ears, I somehow put my heart in order,

“... No nothing,” I said quietly.

... No, there really are all sorts of girls in the world.

Can she only get excited if it’s her sister? Is it something like that?

Come to think of it, they say people with strong spiritual sense have strong sensual desire.

As I felt the expanse of the world, "... I should've just let him die," I heard a dangerous mutter from Kikyouin-san, but continued walking. A few minutes later, we finally arrived at my house. A regular two story. It was built... around twenty years ago, if I recall correctly.

"A-ah..."

Seeing my house for the first time, Kikyouin-san held her mouth half-open at a loss for words. Rather than my house, it was as if she was staring at something whirling around it.

"...A den of evil. You're kidding me...? This isn't just ten or twenty, these numbers."

A den of evil? What does she think she's calling someone else's house? She's in for a libel lawsuit one of these days.

"... I'm surprised you can live in a place like this."

"I've been living here since I was born. Maybe I build up a resistance or something?"

I arbitrarily responded. I mean, no matter how I looked at it, all I could see was my familiar, loving home.

"Dad and mom bought it at the same time I was born, apparently. Said an acquaintance gladly handed it over for fifty thousand yen."

"Fifty thousand!?"

"Yeah. He said a lot of things happened in the house, so they got it for cheap, apparently."

"What do you mean 'a lot of things'!? Go and have a nice talk!"

Hmmm.

Come to think of it, dad did say his work started taking a down turn when we started living in this house. On the contrary, ever since he flew off somewhere, he said he's been doing so well he's surprising himself.

Taking only those events into account, it seemed almost as if this house was haunted by some evil spirit, but if I start thinking about it like that, I'll be prey to all the phony exorcist scams in the world.

You have to learn, Kagoshima Akira.

“Hah...”

Walking round and round the house, Kikyouin-san returned to the front door and let out a big sigh.

“I got it right when I thought your house would be the problem, but... I never imagined it would be on this scale... seriously, I should be getting paid for this.”
“You’re not getting a single yen out of me!”

Like the fiend of money I was, I bit onto the word paid. When it came to money, the situation’s been extremely severe lately.

“It’s fine, really. I’ve already hopped aboard, I’ll properly do something about it. ‘n wait, when you’ve shown me somethin’ like this, I can’t just leave it be.”

Kikyouin-san produced a stack of paper from her breast pocket and started counting them off.

“I’ll set up a barrier to clean them away in one sweep. Step back a bit.”
“Ah, sure.”

She had completely entered work mode, and I could only nod. No, but what’s up with this situation? She even dressed in onmyouji-esque clothing to come, so it might just be best to tag along with her ghostbusting games. Yeah, let’s go with that.

“Mn? Huh? I don’t have enough amulets... ah, right, I used one yesterday... can’t be helped.”

She muttered to himself, this time taking out blank white paper. She bit right down on her thumb. Blood started oozing from a small open wound. With accustomed hands, Kikyouin-san used it to smoothly draw out red lettering on the white paper.

“There we go. Huh? You’re still here? It’s dangerous, get further aw—”
“What are you doing!?”

I reflexively cried, sprinting towards Kikyouin-san and grasping her right hand. To suddenly bite her own thumb till it bleeds, is this girl alright in the head!?

“U-uwah... look at how much you’re bleeding.”
“W-what are you doing!? Let go, let go of me!”

Disregarding her struggle, I looked at the wound. It was an extremely clean cut, the sort that looked like it would heal quickly.

“What were you thinking, Kikyouin-san!? You should treasure your own body more!”

Yes, I know you see it a lot in manga!
I know all the cool kids in Naruto do it to summon!

“Shut it! Let go! Blood letterin’s just the same as usual, I’m perfectly fine!”
“The same as usual!?”

How could this be... I did think she seemed truly accustomed to it, but to think she was a repeat offender. Is this the same sort of suicidal action as cutting your wrist...

Perhaps Kikyouin-san is afflicted with PTSD. That’s why I’m sure she’s got all this going on. She’s in need of some urgent mental care.

“Ah, wait, Kikyouin-san, stop thrashing around. Your bleeding won’t stop.”
“And I’m Telling You Let me go! I’m thrashin’ because you won’t let go of me!”

The yell she threw out with the face of a fierce god didn’t enter my ear, I just stared at the hand in my hand.
Ah, it just keeps bleeding...

“... Now that it’s come to this!”

I held Kikyouin-san’s thumb in my mouth.

“H-hah!?”

Ignoring the strange cry she raised I continued sucking at her blood.

...

“Okay, it stopped. That’s good, Kikyouin-sa—hegh!”

When I rejoiced over her complete recovery with a full-face smile, an iron fist was hammered in. When I looked, a red-faced Kikyouin-san was loudly gritting her teeth.

H-huh? Isn’t she kinda angry?
Super angry?

“Y-y-y-you pervert! Pervert! Are you alright in the head!?”

“No way... I just wanted to stop the blood... see, it happens all the time in shoujo manga. When the clumsy main character girl cuts her finger with a kitchen knife, the man licks it for her, and the girl squees like crazy, that sorta thing.”

“Everythin’ that happens in shoujo manga has the unwritten prerequisite of, ‘this has to be carried out by a hottie’!”

Eeeeh...

She just said it point blank... if she says something like that, it really just lowers my general motivation in regards to life...

“Uwah... you’re seriously terrible, seriously creepy. When I get home, I have to disinfect...”

Kikyouin-san rubbed her finger clean on my clothing.

That hurt.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t look like my good will got through to her.

“... Ah, I really didn’t want to be called creepy by the girl who does baby play with her little sister.”

“Hah!? Who are you saying does baby play!?”

“What? You don’t?”

“..... I-I-I do, but...”

Grating her teeth more, she glared as if to curse me to death. It was the sort of terrifying look that might curse my household for seven generations.

“I even braved the risks of infectious diseases through oral blood ingestion to suck you, and this is what I get.”

“Don’t say you sucked me. And my blood is the epitome of clean and wholesome,” There, Kikyouin-san’s movements came to a sudden halt. “Wait a second. Wait a second, w-wait...”

“What’s wrong?”

“You sucked my thumb, didn’t you...”

“Yeah.”

“And the reason you sucked it is because I bit it and it was bleeding, right...”

She began shaking, her face turning red and then ghastly pale.

Ah, I see. I could tell what she was getting at.

“I guess that was an indirect kiss.”

I said lightly, adding on a tehe.

“To hell with tehe!”

She grasped my lapels and shook me back and forth.

“I-I’m sorry. Ah, but I see. I thought I tasted something that wasn’t blood, but that was the tasted or your lip cream. I get it now.”

“Just keep your mouth shut!”

To think she would be this flustered by an indirect kill. It seems Kikyouin-san was a purer girl than I thought. I was more worried about preventing infection, so I’m not really embarrassed about it.

And there.

As the two of us held a playful back and forth (personal opinion)—

“—! T-this is—”

In an instant, Kikyouin-san’s face went grim. She forcefully turned around, focusing her glare on the darkening sky.

As if her panic from before had been a lie, she gazed over space with an exceedingly serious expression.

As if some switch had been flipped.

Like a first-rate professional with a complete division of personal and private.

“This is bad... the ghosts are beginning to run amuck.”

She said with a click of her tongue, gazing vexingly over the amulets scattered over the ground she had dropped in that prior ruckus.

“In casting, the procedure is everything. Good grief, because of you, this is getting to be a pain. It looks like the charms I dropped have stimulated the spirits.”

She muttered self-derisively as she turned to me.

“With spirits this dense, even someone with spiritual power as low as yours can see them, right?”

Hearing those cynical words, “... Yeah,” I gave a serious nod.

“No, what are you talking about?”

To see and not see, see what? I don't particularly see anything.
Kikyouin-san dropped her shoulders.

“E-eh? No way. You mean you can't even see that? At that level, it wouldn't be strange if a civilian could see...”

She said as she took out a paper, and stuck it on my chest.

“What's this?”

“A charm to measure spiritual power. Something like a meter. Past a certain level, you just shake it off, so only people with low spiritual energy can use it, but—wait, h-huh?”

Kikyouin-san opened her eyes wide.

“It's not reacting at all. Which means... your spiritual power is... zero? Nonexistent...?”

Apparently, my spiritual power is zero.

“... I see. So that's why he couldn't see Tamane-sama's ears or tail. He could see the technique she used to look human, but he can't see the parts she's not putting any effort into showing...”

As she started whispering to herself, I couldn't help but ask.

“Is having zero spirit power amazing or something?”

“The opposite. It's completely unamazing. The exact opposite of genius. More specifically speaking, you have absolutely no talent. In shonen manga terms, you have the sort of constitution that prevents you from ever becoming a main character. It's the first time in my life I've ever seen someone so hopeless.”

This girl really says what's on her mind.

“Yeaah. I'm not really getting it. Can you try equating it to something simple? Even more shonen manga-ish”

“Let's see. The scouter won't even pick you up.”

“That was simple!”

The scouter won't pick me up... I'm practically the background.
I'm not even trash with a power level of 5.

But, good grief.

I don't really tell what personal rules Kikyouin-san used to determine my spiritual power, but she's been putting her all into this ghostbusting game for a while now.

I was just about getting tired of it, should I change the topic? Looks like she reads shonen manga, so how about I try bringing up dragon ball?

"Lately, Trunks and Vegeta's Super Saiyan 3 forms have started coming out in games, but what do you think about that? As a fan of the source material, that sort of thing is just kinda—"

"Careful!"

In the middle of my chat, Kikyouin-san pushed me away. As if she had just saved me from a 'something' approaching at a tremendous speed. When I regained my posture and looked at her, she was no longer paying attention to me.

"RinByouTouShaKaiJinRetsuZaiZen—Rai!"

Sticking up two fingers on her right hand, she prepared charms in her left. Repeatedly jumping as if to avoid unseeable attacks, she measured out the timing, and making symbolic gestures alongside a tempestuous voice, she threw the paper charms.

Her bundled, blond hair was always one step behind her practiced wasteless movements.

"Shikigami summon—'Kara', 'Kiri', 'Kuru'!"

She threw three human-shaped papers. As they left their masters hands, I wonder as if a gust began blowing, as not falling to the ground despite the passage of time, they began to flutter around Kikyouin-san.

"Fuh!" "Shi!" "Haaaaah!"

Shouted Kikyouin-san.

Swinging her hands in empty space, stepping back, throwing her charms, making hand symbols.

"This is... the end!"

Her finger tore through space.

Five times. To draw a five pointed star, five lines.

“By the name of the Twenty Fourth head of the Kikyoun House, Kikyoun Yuzuki, I release now the power of the five elements!”

For an instant, a flash raced across the area. It was so bright I instinctively closed my eyes. When I opened them a while later, the air had become a little lighter, and there was Kikyoun-san looking up at the sky, breathing heavy breaths.

“Ah, that was tiring.”

Letting out a voice overflowing with fatigue, she walked over to me.

“I somehow did it. Good grief, you should really be thankful to me. That was a job I’d usually take fifty thousand for, at the very least. Well, I’ll be properly charging you next time...”

As she started speaking triumphantly, I grasped her by the shoulders.

“... It’s alright.”

Maybe my voice was shaking.

Maybe I was shedding tears.

“You don’t have to push yourself to draw my attention anymore. You’re fine just the way you are. Even if you’re just you, I’ll be your friend...”

This girl is... really in for it.

Saying there are ghosts and making an uproar, speaking formally to her sister, doing baby play, doing something like cutting her wrist, and finally, carrying out a pantomime of outrageous quality...

I could only think she was shouldering a mental ailment I could no longer laugh at. This can’t go on. I can’t leave this child alone any longer. I have to do something!

Receiving my warm eyes overflowing with kindness,

“..... Tsk,”

Kikyoun-san unpleasantly clicked her tongue.

Unfortunately, it seems my love (?) didn’t get across.

However!

My blazing hot heart won't be dampened by such cold eyes.
I'll turn Kikyouin-san into an upright human being!

Chapter 3: Lonely Eyes

And so,

“Kikyouin-san will be becoming a member of this club.”

I declared energetically in the ComClub room.

As a preface to my grand plan to have Kikyouin-san make friends, I chose to have her enter the ComClub. It was something Kagurai-senpai originally requested of me, and you could say it worked out just right.

In regards to my earnest fervor, Kagurai-senpai and Kurisu-chan presented me with a light applause and gentle smiles.

Well, those two were fine. There was no problem with their attitude.

The problem was...

“... Hmph.” “...Tsk.”

Sullen, and clearly in bad moods, the remaining two. Not attempting to meet eyes, Orino-san and Kikyouin-san faced opposite directions from one another.

Why were these two on bad terms

Yeeah. This is troublesome. The air’s growing stagnant.

“Kurisu-chan.”

“Yes. What is it, Kagoshima-senpai?”

“Say something interesting to lighten the mood.”

Kurisu-chan was shocked.

“K-K-Kagoshima-senpai... do you know the term asking the impossible?”

“And Kurisu-chan, did you know? In Japan, we have this scary, scary system known as seniority. Well, you’re a half, so you might not have heard of it.”

“Seniority...”

“Once you venture into working society, if your senpai tells you to embarrass yourself, you have no choice but to embarrass yourself. Of course, I’m kind, so I won’t say anything too harsh.”

Taking my joke seriously, “... this world is scary,” Kurisu-chan muttered as she thought to herself.

She really is an honest, good girl. There's worth found in teasing her.

"Umm, Kikyouin-senpai. What are your hobbies?"

As the result of her worries, Kurisu-chan addressed the new member with the idle talk of a marriage interview.

"Nothing in particular. Not really."

She got cold words in return.

"R-really..."

"K-Kikyouin-san's hobby is the occult!"

Unable to see Kurisu-chan go despondent (rather, more than half of it was my fault), I hurriedly followed through.

"She really loves ghosts and youkai. So Kurisu-chan, when it starts warming up, just get Kikyouin-san to tell you a scary story for a chill."

"Ghosts!?"

With a rattle, Kurisu dexterously stepped back while still in her chair. Her complexion drained at once, as she embraced her own shoulders. Seeing her shiver reminded me of a small animal.

"... What's wrong, Kurisu-chan?"

"N-no, it's nothing."

"Don't tell me you're no good with ghosts?"

"W-w-w-w-w-what are you talking about, Kagoshima-senpai!? I'm already in my first year of high school! In magic school terms, I'm on my eighth cycle! T-there's no way I could be scared of ghosts..."

"..."

"..."

"... Ah, Kurisu-chan, behind you."

"Eek!"

Crap. This is a little fun.

But Kurisu-chan was no good with ghosts, huh. She's normally fighting fantasy monsters—in the made-up setting she chose to cosplay as. How strange.

"You're called Kurisu?"

Resting her chin on her hands, Kikyouin-san spoke uninterestedly.

“Are you scared of ghosts?”

“Erk... I-I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize. That’s just how they are... but if you’re no good with ghosts, you’re better off staying away from that man. He’s got another evil spirit possessing him.”

“E-eeeh!?”

Kurisu-chan was horrified. So was I.

“What are you saying, Kikyouin-san!?”

“I’m giving advice. I purified your whole house yesterday, but I didn’t do anything about the one sticking to you. Well, since you’ve got zero spiritual energy, I doubt it’ll do any harm. Even if I leave it be, it’ll go away eventually.”

No, I don’t care about the setting she’s playing!
Say what you want, but please don’t say things that’ll get Kurisu-chan to hate me!

“K-Kurisu-chan...”

I timidly turned to the side. Kurisu-chan was awkwardly turning her face away.

“Oh, Kurisu-chan...”

“Ah, no, I’m not really, scared or anything. It’s just, for a while, I’d be happy if you didn’t get close to me...”

I fell into a bottomless abyss.
Unsteadily standing to my feet, I took one step towards Kurisu-chan. Kurisu-chan stood, she took one step back.
Two steps forward. Two steps back. Another. Another.

“K-Kagoshima-senpai, your desperation is scaring me...”

“Calm down. Look here, I’m not scary. It’s just me. Your kind, gently, Kagoshima-senpai.”

“S-s-scary! Ghosts are one thing, but Kagoshima-senpai’s bloodshot eyes are scaring me!”

“Wait. Don’t be scared! Get a little closer!”

“E-EEK! Stay away!”

“Now, now!”

“Nooooooooo!”

“No sexual harassment!”

Gweh.

Orino-san pulled me by the collar and returned me to my senses.

Looks like I went too far. Got to reflect, reflect.

“Now then, enough of the skit. For now, let me give an introduction as club president.”

Measuring her timing, Kagurai-senpai cut in.

I didn’t particularly intend that as a skit or anything...

“Some here might already be aware, but let me say it again. I will fulfill all of our club activities as the ‘Computer Club’. I don’t mind if the rest of you come whenever you want, and do whatever you want. Of course, you can be ghost members if it suits you.”

Temporarily cutting her words, she closed her eyes, and lightly lowered her head.

“I do feel sorry for using all of you in order to maintain my sanctuary. I’m sorry. And thank you.”

So she was firm where she had to be. That was what was good about her. And Kagurai-senpai began distributing white paper to us. The enlistment forms. It seems she procured just enough.

By the way, just as Kagurai-senpai schemed, Orino-san and Kurisu-chan gave the okay with no extra words. As busy as they were, the free absences were possibly the largest deciding factor. An additional by the way, the vice president was me. There was no real reason to it. Kagurai-senpai said, ‘Wanna do it?’ so I said, ‘Why not’ without much consideration.

But—Kikyouin-san didn’t look like she would be moving her hand.

Eventually, she tiresomely opened her mouth.

“I have no intention of joining this club.”

She plainly declared.

“Today, that idiot just forcefully dragged me along,” glaring at me, she continued in a harsh tone. “I haven’t the slightest intention of joinin’ this incomprehensible club.”

“I see,” Kagurai-senpai nodded. She didn’t seem to be angry at having her club called incomprehensible. Well, it’s not like senpai wanted to establish a club in the first place, so I guess it was natural.

“Kikyouin, was it? I don’t think this is a bad deal for you. Even if you’ll be affiliated with this club, there are no substantial actions you’ll need to take, or activities to take part in. There will be far less restrictions than in any other club you join.”

She was considerably blunt.
... perhaps too blunt.

In that case, we wouldn’t be able to accomplish my goal of, ‘the slightly loopy Kikyouin-san making friends’.

“Whether it’s just in name or not, I don’t want to.”
“Hmm. I see. Could you tell me what you hate about this arrangement?”
“There’s someone I want to get away from.”
“Who?”
“That idiot.”

She proclaimed, looking towards me. I looked behind me. There was no one there. Good grief, she’s going to say there’s some wandering ghost she can’t stand or something, isn’t she.

“I mean you!”

Her ballpoint pen hit my head.

“Eeh!? Me!?”
“Why are you so surprised!? Did you think you gave me a favorable impression!?”
“I did!”
“Don’t happily nod!”

I mean, Kikyouin-san lied about there being ghosts, excessively busying herself around me. I thought her hatred was also a form of love.

“... Hey, Kikyoin-san,” in an unpleasant voice, Orino-san stuck in her mouth.
“Could you please not throw my pens?”
“Ah, that was yours?”
“Yeah, mine.”
“No wonder it was so tasteless.”
“... What was that? Could it be you’re picking a fight?”
“Not. Particularly.”
“...”

The two exchanged a glare that sent sparks flying.
They really don’t get along. Is it because their first contact on the day she transferred was bad?

“D-don’t fight, you two...”

Kurisu-chan hastily spoke.

“Fate’s somehow brought us all together, so I want to get along with everyone... though I’m a little scared of ghosts... ehehe.”
“” ...””

A small voice, and the form of an underclassman doing her best, Orino-san and Kurisu-san made awkward faces, draining the strength from their shoulders. Did they realize they weren’t acting as mature senpais?

“Ha. Good grief. It looks like Kurisu-chan is the real adult here.”

A mechanical pencil and eraser hit me in the face.
Ow! Something got in my eye!

“Seriously, stop throwing my writing utensils!”
“Shut it! ‘n wait, you threw one that time too!”
“That’s... because Kagoshima-kun’s stuck up face pissed me off too much, it was reflex...”
“Right!? It’s his fault for being so irritating!”
“I totally get you! But that doesn’t make it right to throw my things!”

The dwindling flame was relit anew.
Kagurai-senpai looked at me with, “that one was your fault,” eyes. Kurisu-chan stared at me with a, “I’m begging you, how about we read the mood a bit,” sort

of look.

... It's kinda depressing. I didn't have any ill intent.

"And wait, yesterday, yeah yesterday! What did you go to Kagoshima-kun's house for!?"

"I told you over lunch break, it's none of your business."

"It's totally my business! Kagoshima-kun's parents are both overseas, so he's living alone. It's not right for a girl to go play on her own at that sort of boy's house."

"I didn't go there because I wanted to! Who in the world would willingly venture to that idiot's house!?"

"In that case, just don't go!"

"I've got my own circumstances!"

"What circumstances!?"

"I don't have to tell you!"

They noisily began to quarrel. The verbal brawl gradually heated up to where it wouldn't be strange for a hand to fly... for some reason, I feared there would be severe casualties to the greater population if these two seriously fought. And as I mulled over what to do...

Bang!

The sound of an impact so great, I wondered if the desk would break. Their quarrel came to a stop as all eyes gathered at the head of the long table. Kagurai-senpai's hands were still fixed in position after slamming the desk. Closing her eyes, she quietly shut her mouth.

The room returned to silence.

Eventually,

"Alright, let's take a picture,"

Kagurai-senpai broke the silence with a cheery tone. Blowing off the dubious air surrounding the room, she started probing through her bag.

"A picture... what's this all of a sudden?"

"I thought I'd take a picture with all the club members, so I bought a camera yesterday. You see them all the time in the openings of adolescence-themed games, those photographs with all the main characters together."

“... Dating sims again?”

Well, I got what she was talking about.

Those. At the end of the opening scene, a wind blows in that sways the curtain, letting a photograph gently fall to the floor. Like that last episode of Yu Yu Hakusho.

“Now everyone stand up. Line up in front of that wall.”

I was the first to stand, getting in front of the wall as told. Despite everything, this person really was my senpai. I can't say whether taking a picture was the best option or not, but it was certain she had changed the stormy air. Sensing Kagurai-senpai's tact, Orino-san and Kurisu-chan stood from their seats as well. But.

“What's wrong, Kikyouin. Hurry and get in line.”

“... I don't want to.” It was a rare discouraged voice from the strong-headed girl.

“I hate photographs.”

“Yeah? What's this, is your makeup off today or something?”

“Completely wrong. It's not that...”

“Well, don't worry about it, don't worry about it. It's not like I won't say you have to join the club just because your picture was taken. It's just to commemorate the moment.”

“Ah w-wait...”

Half-forcefully standing a reluctant Kikyouin-san, she lined her up with the rest of us.

“Now say cheese.”

Having already mastered its use, Kagurai-senpai set up a timer, and set the digital camera on the desk before taking her position.

Pirorirorin, it let off a cute sound.

“How did it come out...”

Picking up the digital camera, the moment she looked at the screen, Kagurai-senpai's expression clouded over.

“What happened? Wha—” I followed on, “Eh?” came Orino-san “E-eep...” went Kurisu-chan. Peering into the screen, we each leaked something of a

scream.

In short, it was a ghost photo.

One of Kagurai-senpa's shapely legs wasn't captured.

Orino-san's right arm faded to nothingness.

A faint girl's face was visible next to Kurisu-chan's head.

... I, that's scary! I look like a Dullahan!

And wait, isn't the damage around me alone especially high?

"Eep..." as if she might fall from anemia, Kurisu-chan weakly swooned to the floor. "S-s-save me, mama... mama..."

I had my doubts about that line coming from a high schooler, but let's put that aside. While it wasn't at Kurisu-chan's level, both Orino-san and Kagurai-senpai were ghastly pale. Likely myself as well.

"That's why I told you..."

Kikyouin-san spoke in a small voice unsuited to her.

"When a photo's taken of me, it always winds up like this... my spiritual energy stimulates the surrounding wandering ghosts... I'm versed in exorcism, so it doesn't affect me, but... the surrounding people are always."

I looked at the photo anew. Certainly, Kikyouin-san alone didn't have anything off.

"No, but, Kikyouin-san... isn't this just a coincidence? I'm pretty sure ghost photos can all be explained through science."

I mean.

"There's no way ghosts exist."

"... Yeah, just keep telling yourself that."

She said offhandedly and stood from her seat.

"Now quit botherin' me. I don't need any friends."

She said coldly, glaring at us.

Ah, there it is again.

Those eyes, again.

As if she didn't place any hopes in us, those harsh eyes.

“Ah, oy, Kikyouin!”

Kagurai-senpai called to stop her, but ignoring the attempt, she left the classroom with swift feet. Only an unpleasant, truly unpleasant air remained. As if ghosts were dancing about the space.

Would I be better off not getting involved with Kikyouin-san anymore? That night, I sprawled out over the living room sofa as I contemplated such things.

Perhaps having her make friends was simply my forceful positivity. She’s free to choose whether she makes friends or not. Perhaps I was just pushing my own sense of values onto her. Whether ghosts really exist, whether she really is an onmyouji. Those trivial problems didn’t really matter.

The important thing was how Kikyouin-san felt.

It looked to me like the person called Kikyouin Yuzuki had firm rules by which she lived her life. Was it really alright for me to violate them without any major resolve? Wasn’t it better to just leave her alone?

“... But, you know.”

Her eyes. Those lonely eyes had been unpleasantly burned into my brain.

“Maan, I just don’t know.”

Standing up, yeaah, I stretched out.

It seems my brain matter’s just not suited for thinking out the hard stuff.

And before I worry about someone else, I need to do something about myself. A person who’s not satisfied with themselves has no qualifications to speak on another’s behalf.

Now, how about me.

“... Seriously, a hundred thousand yen, what do I do...”

In regards to the scam, I did put a call in to the police. When I did, I was patched through to the consumer center. The kind lady there told me, “Eh? You bought a hundred thousand yen urn? Umm, no one does that in this day and age. I’d prefer if you keep those jokes in bad taste to yourself,” she got mad and I wanted to cry.

Over twenty minutes, I somehow got her to understand it wasn't a joke, but in the end, I had far too little information on hand, and there were no measures she could take.

"... Well, what goes around, comes around, I'm sure."

Pushing the problem into the future, for now, I must live in the moment. So in order to live this day to the fullest, meaning to satisfy this empty stomach—point being, I needed money, so I decided to search around the vending machines for spare change.

... I'm well aware of how pitiful that is, but if you want to make an omelet, you've got to break a few eggs. I put on my shoes and opened the front door.

When I opened it, there was Kikyouin-san.

It looked like she was just about to press the doorbell.

"Huh? What's up?"

Just a few hours ago, we parted with such a gloomy mood, so why?

"Ah, could it be you came to apologize?"

"... Why would I have to apologize to you?"

"Umm, something like, sorry for saying so many mean things?"

"Go die in a ditch."

She said it straight to my face.

... It's kinda...

I'm no Kagurai-senpai, but if this was a dating sim, even if your first impression is terrible, gradually building up your affection points from there is a common development. But I get the feeling Kikyouin's first impression of me was the high point. This nagging feeling that my parameters are on the plunge from zero into the negatives.

"I came to return this. I don't want you thinking I made off with it."

She said coldly, before lightly tossing something over.

After frantically catching it, I inspected it to find... the urn I bought.

“T-this is... why do you have it!?”

“I said I’d borrow it yesterday, didn’t I? You don’t remember?”

“Eh...? ... Oh, now that you mention it, that sounds like...”

Yesterday evening, after Kikyouin-san purified the evil spirits—or at least ran her mouth on that sort of thing, “Let me look over the floor plans, just in case,” she said, so I led her around the house.

Well, at the time, I was full of an urge to, “have Kikyouin-san made some friends,” so I generally ignored most of what she was saying.

“Why did you take this?”

“It caught my eye. I took it home and inspected it in detail.”

It caught her eye?

It caught the eye of a real self-proclaimed onmyouji

“After inspecting it, I figured out why—”

“It’s something amazing, isn’t it!? It was made with miracle-rich soil, wasn’t it!”

I’m begging you! It can be a lie, just tell me it’s so!

“No. It was just an urn.”

Slump. My head drooped with enough force to smash it into the ground.

“n wait, they were selling the same thing at the hundred-yen shop in front of the station.”

Another slump. I hung my head with enough force to bury it.

“By your story, some strange man tricked you into buyin’ it. Hah. How idiotic. How much did you put out? Around five thousand yen?”

“Y-yeah. Well, somewhere around that...”

I can’t say it. Even if my mouth melts off, I can’t tell her.

But something was bothering me.

“Huh? But if it’s just an urn, why did you take it back with you? Was there something strange about it?”

“... The bottom, have a look.”

She jerked up her chin, so I flipped it over. On the bottom of the urn, a star had been drawn in carbon ink.

“What’s this? A signature?”

“Sehman. The five pointed star. It’s a symbol onmyouji use to cast spells. It’s hard to see, but it was drawn inside the urn as well. The urn itself is just from the hundred yen shop, but it’s been imbued with a complicated technique. What’s more...”

Her mouth warping, she detestably continued her words.

“The pattern of this spell... belongs to the Tsuchimikado Main House.”

Tsuchimikado.

The main house to the Kikyouin branch family.

Going on what Kai said, they’re famous in Kyoto, a famed house earning money through divinations.

“... Good grief,” she ran a hand through her blond hair. “Why is the main house comin’ out? I don’t get it.”

“So this urn is...?”

“For argument’s sake, as long as you place it in the right quadrant, it’s made to properly exhibit an effect. In the first place, rather than doing something on its own, the spell was made to show its power with the proper placement and environment.”

“...”

“But you just left it in the entrance, right? In the case of this urn, you have to place it at the demon gate in the northeast, or it’s pointless.”

No, what I want to know isn’t a pointer in feng shui.

If someone in the famed divining Tsuchimikado House made it, then would someone buy it off me for a pretty penny?

“Hey, could you tell me about the man who came to sell this to you?”

She drew close to me, I was a little flustered.

by Kikyouin-san’s—desperation.

“It happened two days ago.”

I told her everything I remembered.

The travelling monk’s face, his clothes, height, voice, apart from the amount of money he took from me, I got everything across. Once she had finished

listening, “Ah, I see. That guy,” she muttered.

“You know him?”

“Pretty much. We see each other once a year at best. But when it comes to someone in their early twenties, male, tall and lean, and an onmyouji related to the Tsuchimikado House, only one guy comes to mind.”

Tsuchimikado Senzou.

So said Kikyouin-san.

That was the traveling monk’s... the swindler who tricked me’s name.

“Third son of the Tsuchimikado House’s direct line. It’s not like he’s got no talent as an onmyouji, but because he’s got two talented older brothers, he’s been a bit buried up. Ah, come to think of it, there was a rumor that he ran off from the house, but it looks like it was true. I never thought he would be out here acting as a con man...”

Furrowing her brow, she sounded irritated. Perhaps she was ashamed that someone she knew was working as a swindler.

“Tsuchimikado Senzou—a disgrace of an onmyouji. I’ll have to hunt him down and send him home.”

“So you mean,”

As onmyouji and spells and other ambiguous terms came out along the way, I couldn’t understand half of it, but,

“You mean, Kikyouin-san, that you’re going to chase after that Tsuchimikado-san?”

I could tell that was the most important point.

“That’s right. It’s not a bad idea to put the Tsuchimikado House in my debt.”

“In that case, I’ll help out.”

Our objectives were the same, it would be best to work together.

“Rejected.”

She made the decision without the slightest hesitation.

“An amateur doing what he shouldn’t only causes trouble.”

“But it’s dangerous if I leave a single girl to do it...”

“I’m tellin’ you, it’s far more dangerous for a single girl to do it with a deadweight draggin’ her down.”

I was denied far too plainly, it was a little depressing. Yet I got the feeling I wouldn’t even be able to beat Kikyouin-san in a bare-handed fight, so I could only keep quiet.

“I’ll properly get your money back for you. Five thousand yen, right?”

“Ah! Oh, no...”

“What, did you get it cheaper?”

“... No. It was five thousand yen, on the dot...”

Crap. To think these troubles awaited me.

I shouldn’t have put on airs and lied!

I can’t tell her, ‘it was really a hundred thousand, tehe’ at this point!

While I was holding my head in anguish, Kikyouin-san had already finished her business, quickly disappearing without so much as a goodbye.

Now that it’s come to this...

Chapter 4: A Swindler? An Onmyouji?

My first course of action was to seek cooperation from all the members of the ComClub. Informing everyone that Kikyouin-san was after the swindler Tsuchimikado Senzou, I proposed we should help her out.

If I leave it to Kikyouin-san, I'd only be getting five thousand yen back, so I needed to do something to get myself involved with the case. The ComClub members gladly hopped aboard my proposal (though for some reason, Orino-san seemed a bit displeased).

And so on Saturday, when everyone's schedule was open, the four of us hit the town to gather information. Of course, keeping it a secret from Kikyouin-san.

"By the way, Kurisu-chan, you're brimming with energy today."

Walking down a considerably flourishing shopping district, I spoke to Kurisu-chan walking beside me. Staying together would be terribly inefficient, so we went off in groups of two. The result of our only rock and paper rock paper scissors paired me with Kurisu-chan and Orino-san with Kagurai-senpai.

"Oh? You think so?"

"Yeah. Did something good happen to you?"

"Fu fu fu. Why you see!"

Tadaa, she said as she opened her bag and took out a single paper amulet.

"Kikyouin-senpai gave it to me! This had the ability to drive away all the wandering spirits around me!"

"..."

Umm, I wonder about that.

For example, when you're staying at an inn and you see talismans stuck all over the scroll hanging on the wall, you don't suddenly think, "Oh that's good. There are talismans, so it's safe." The presence of cleansing talismans means there's something to be cleansed away, a paradoxical proof of existence...

"Kurisu-chan, do you feel okay?"

"Yes! As long as I have this, I'm not afraid of any ghosts!"

[IMAGE OF KURISU HOLDING TALISMAN]

“I see.”

Well, she’s happy, so I guess it’s fine.

“But still, that Kikyouin-san, huh... when did you two start getting along?”

“Umm, it’s not like we’re on good terms... the truth is,”

According to Kurisu-chan, during yesterday’s lunch break, Kikyouin-san went out of her way to drop by the first years’ classroom and hand over the amulet.

‘I’m sorry for scaring you. You’ll be fine if you have this,’ she said. Hearing that, my mood took a turn for blue. In that ComClub ghost photo ruckus, Kurisu-chan truly was scared. Perhaps that had been weighing on Kikyouin-san’s mind.

“... Kikyouin-senpai’s a bit strong-willed and her mouth’s harsh, but she really is a good person.”

“You’re right, I think so too.”

I quietly nodded.

Weaving our way through the grounds, we continued our chat.

“But you know, Kurisu-chan when you like magic so much, you’re no good with ghosts? Didn’t you say magic borrowed the power of the spirits or something?”

“Spirits and ghosts are completely different.”

She puffed her cheeks suddenly, making a face as if she’d never thought she’d hear those words.

“Spirits are like the crystallization of the mana that resides in all of creation, the planet’s life force. They’re formed when high-density mana takes on shape. While the majority of them don’t possess intellect, in extremely rare cases, there are spirits who possess higher intelligence than humans. But they’re all amicable with humankind.”

I’m sure all this information from Kurisu-chan came from ‘Kurea’s Grand Adventure’. A slightly old epic fantasy, and a manga that had Kurisu-chan totally hooked.

“If you ask why a witch must recite an incantation, it is to establish contact

with the spirits. This isn't restricted to magic users, all human words possess an innate power. The weight of words, one might call it. An incantation uses a refined dictation to manifest the power of words to their greatest possible level, and by embedding one's own magic into them, a contract is established with the spirits to—"

I cringed a bit from Kurisu-chan's long-running ramble. Yeah. Generally speaking, I didn't really care.

"Well magic, and spirits, and incantations, I don't need theories on those difficult things."

I shrugged my shoulders, my speech tinged with a wry laugh.

"That sort of thing kinda sounds behind the times."

"Behind the times!?"

Kurisu-chan was inflicted with a shock greater than she could handle.

"The latest works on magic don't have any of that stuff anymore. Works where magic can just do anything is the mainstream. I mean, it's magic. No one's chanting incantations anymore. I guess it just never gained popularity."
"... I'm not working as a witch to be popular."

As she said that, Kurisu-chan looked extremely sad.

To put together the results of our investigation, we headed for a nearby casual dinner.

... Or so we were supposed to.

"T-this magic is...!"

Said Kurisu-chan as she dashed off somewhere, so I entered the restaurant alone.

Hah. That girl's eighth-grade syndrome is serious.

Distressing over my underclassman's future, I took a window seat and ordered a hamburger lunch set with orange juice. Opening my notebook, I took a look over the day's investigation results.

By following the trail of eyewitness reports, we found two other people who

were duped into buying urns. A college student living alone, and a housewife. Just like me, they were both scared with the line, “Your house is possessed by an evil spirit,” and ended up making a purchase.

But what bothered me was the amount.

One paid five hundred yen, the other paid a thousand.

They both said, “He just wouldn’t give up, and it wasn’t too expensive,” as the reason they bought the urn. That’s why their sense they had been ‘victims of fraud’ was considerably light. You could say they barely lost anything.

... Why am I the only one whose losses are on another level?

One hundred thousand yen... the hell’s with a hundred thousand, seriously...

“Wait, aaaah!”

I recalled an incredible fact, causing me to cry out. The customers’ eyes pierced into my all at once, but it wasn’t the time to care about that.

By the gods.

I just entered a restaurant without any money!

I had completely gotten unto my usual rhythm and placed an order, but at present, my entire life savings total two hundred yen... so if I came here with Kurisu-can, she’d end up paying for me. That was dangerous. I was able to avoid the pitiful shame of borrowing money from an underclassman, but this is still a huge pinch.

What do I do... the meals here easily go for seven hundred yen...

That’s right! I just have to cancel the order. I can still make it in time.

“Thank you for waiting. Here’s your hamburger set and orange juice.”

It came out.

Dammit, I came to a well-serviced well-managed shop.

... This is bad. Now that the food’s come out, it has become impossible to take back my order. This is a real pinch. A pinch that shoots right into the top five pinches of Kagoshima Akira’s life.

For the time being, I started eating (I mean, it would go cold), and thought up countermeasures. Roughly speaking, there was Plan A-dine and dash-and Plan B-give an honest apology.

Plan A’s a crime, and out of the question.

Plan B is... yeah. If this was a manga, they’d tell me to “Work off what you ate!”

or something, and put my to washing dishes in the kitchen, but I doubt that will happen in reality. There's a high probability they'd just get angry and call the police.

"... That's right!"

Having finished off my hamburger set and downed my orange juice, I hit upon a brilliant strategy. I'm sure my brain was making good use of my sugar intake from the meal, no doubt about it. They often say a battle can't be fought on an empty stomach.

Plan C: search for an acquaintance.

Search for an acquaintance, and borrow money from them.

With plates for eyes, I surveyed the area. The men and woman of all ages, inside the shop and out, I observed each and every soul. Search, you have to search.

"... Eh?"

I found one.

In the back of the store, setting up camp at a four-seat booth by his lonesome self, with a mountainous load of food on the table before him. Perhaps he took off his amigasa indoors, as he had it hanging over the staff he leaned against the table. His black monk robe and sandals were exactly the same as I'd seen before. I had heard the man's name from Kikyouin-san.

Tsuchimikado Senzou.

The con man who tricked me.

Unable to stay where I was, I raced over to Tsuchimikado-san. But when I actually looked him in the face, my words wouldn't come out. He was a slippery swindler. I had no idea how I was supposed to talk to him.

Looking at me,

"Hm? Hmmm."

In the middle of his meal, Tsuchimikado-san continued chewing as he tilted his head. After he washed down the contents of his mouth with a drink, he hit his hands together in enlightenment.

“Oh, right. I was wondering who it was, but you’re that young mister who fell hook line and sinker, and paid me one hundred thousand yen.”

Intimately, in a tone that made light of his opponent. It was only the second time I spoke to Tsuchimikado-san, but it was all too clear his manner of speech the first time was an act.

“Huh? What’s wrong, mister, clamming up now? Ah, could it be you still haven’t noticed you’ve been deceived? Then I really slipped up there. Spoiling the whole shebang.”

“... No, I noticed that one.”

“That so? Hmm, well, how should I put it, have a seat, why don’t you? Eat all you want. My treat. Though I say that, it’s all on your tab, really. Ha ha ha.”

“.....”

Still silent, I took a seat.

What is it, this difficulty I’m facing.

When the one who tricked me appeared, Tsuchimikado-san showed no panic or fear. He held himself truly boldly. In the few seconds since we met, I got the feeling he had seized the lead. I knew I would be taken for another ride if I kept silently staring, so I high-handedly changed the topic.

“Umm, give me back my money.”

“No way. I already used quite a bit of it, anyway.”

He said without any apologetics and gave a jovial laugh.

“T-then give me back whatever you have left of it. I’m begging you, Tsuchimikado-san.”

“Mnn?”

As he reached out for a sandwich, Tsuchimikado-san dubiously furrowed his brow.

“Now why do you know my name?”

“An acquaintance told me.”

“Hmm. Could that person be a little lassy called Kikyoun Yuzuki?”

I blankly raised my head.

“By yer face, looks like I hit the mark.”

... Apparently, my face is easy to read. I knew there was no point in hiding it, so I honestly admitted.

“That’s right. But how could you tell?”

“I hear that girl’s been on my tail lately. I was wondering how she found out, but I see, so it was through you.”

It seems Tsuchimikado-san really was Kikyouin-san’s acquaintance.

“n so, mister, what’s yer connection with the eldest daughter of the Kikyous? Did you put in a request ‘r something?”

“Oh no, she’s my classmate in high school. She transferred in the other day.”

“Transfer? Ah, oh I see, I see. That crazy training they do, sending you all over the place. I was sent to Hokkaido you know. How nostalgic.”

“Hey, Tsuchimikado-san.”

I forcefully changed the topic. If I didn’t, it didn’t look like I could ever grasp control of the conversation?

“Why are you out here conning people? Kikyouin-san said you ran away from home, but are you running low on money, so you don’t have a choice?”

“Well I’ll be. So you even know that much. She really is a talker, the Kikyouin eldest.”

Not particularly perturbed, Tsuchimikado-san went on.

“Well, that’s right. I’m currently in the process of my grand escape. Couldn’t bear all the nagging back home.”

“Are you alright? Isn’t your family worried?”

“No way, no way. No one there gives a lick about me. Big brothers one and two are super talented, super skilled. As long as they’re there, doesn’t look like there’ll be a problem with the family business. And I’m also doing good for myself; humans, you know, they’re at their best when they’re free.”

He didn’t sound like he was talking tough.

Like he was satisfied with his current self—the self that ran away from home. That was the sort of air he gave.

“Hey. No matter how cool you make it sound, there’s not much you can say when you’re pulling scams.”

"I started scamming when I came to this town. 'n wait, you were my first cherished victim. Congrats."

"It's an honor I'd love to shred up. But after coming to this town...? Then what were you doing before that?"

"Helping people."

Said Tsuchimikado-san. Horribly short, and definitively.

"Helping people?"

"Right. Was out helping people troubled by ghosts and youkai. Goes without saying, I wasn't running a charity, mind you. I can't live on dust."

"Eh? But..."

He got money helping people hurt by ghosts.

Wasn't that the same was what he was doing now?

That's what you call phony exorcism scam, right?

I mean... ghosts don't exist in the world.

"I get what you want to say."

While I didn't say it aloud, it seems it came out on my face again.

"That's right, they're the same. From your side, I guess swindlers and onmyouji are one and the same..."

Narrowing his eyes, he gave a troubled laugh.

At the time, his air... was the lonesome air of someone who realized something, it reminded me a bit of Kikyouin-san. With contempt for we who lived in a different world, yet with envy all the same.

"Back home, all the requests came from people who understood, well I guess there's no use saying it to you. It's the path I chose... now then, guess it's time I go."

He declared and stood from his seat. Pulling down his amigasa, he took his khakkhara in hand, passing by my side. His large back looked extremely lonely to me.

So to that back, I,

"Hold it right there!"

Put in a retort, grasping the sleeve of his robe with all my might.

“The money for this! The bill! Don’t you dare nonchalantly push it onto me.”

That was dangerous. I was almost about to be dragged along by. I was about to have to enact Plan C again.

“... Tsk.”

“Don’t click your tongue at me! Thanks to you, I’m flat broke!”

“Fine, got it, got it.”

He painstakingly said, as he took a brown envelope from his breast pocket and tossed it at me. It was the envelope I had handed one hundred thousand yen to him in the other day.

“E-eh? This is...”

“There’s seventy thousand yen left. Use that to pay the check. Sorry, but I can’t return what’s been used up. I stayed in a hotel these past two days.”

“W-why?”

I reflexively asked. Even if it had dwindled to seventy thousand, I was supposed to be happy my money came back, and yet I tossed over the question. I mean, for a swindler to return the money he cheated off of me...

“I’ll be out of this town in a bit, so could you let me off, mister?”

“You’re leaving?”

“Cuz it’ll all be over soon”

Over? What will?

Did he mean his scam?

“Well then mister. If fate has it, let’s meet again somewhere.”

He threw his words to the win, this time leaving the diner for real. For some reason, I wasn’t able to stand. Give me back the rest of it, or at least say sorry, there were supposed to be plenty of things he had yet to say, but unable to say a word, I just saw off Tstuchimikado-san’s back.

By the time the sun was about to set, Kurisu-chan returned, and we gathered at the fountain in front of the station. The Kagurai-Orino team managed to get

into contact with three additional victims. A housewife, a salaryman living alone, and a freelancer. The price of the thankful urn was once again varied. Twelve hundred yen. Eight hundred yen. And... zero yen.

“Zero yen? There was someone who got it for free?”

“Yeah.”

Sitting cross-legged on the rim of the fountain, Kagurai-senpai gave a slight nod..

“It seems the freelancer didn’t intend to fork over a single yen, but after he declined again and again, Tsuchimikado Senzou said, ‘then you can have it for free, please just take it,’ apparently.”

“He said he thought he didn’t really mind if it was free,” Orino-san added on.

“And that if we wanted it, we could have it, so I accepted it just in case.”

“What? You accepted it?”

“Yeah. Look.”

I took the urn from Orino-san and inspected it closely.

It was the same. Exactly the same as the one I bought. There was a star mark on the bottom and a complicated pattern inside. Tsuchimikado-san likely bought them en masse from the hundred yen shop, drew stars and sold out.

But I never thought there’d be a free one.

Even if it was a hundred yen urn, he’d still end up in the minus if he gave it for free. In the first place, excluding my hundred thousand yen, his prices were wholly too cheap.

To commit fraud... given the risks of committing a crime, his returns were far too small.

... It’ll all be over soon.

What was Tsuchimikado-san even trying to do?

“.. Hey, Kagoshima. Is this really a case of fraud.”

Kagurai-senpai sounded a little bored.

“No matter how you look at it, the damages are too minimal. I don’t want to paraphrase a case by its losses, but it’s far too small-scale for that.”

“... Right,” Kurisu-chan agreed. “No one seemed particularly troubled. That they’d been scammed or deceived, there wasn’t anyone who really felt that

way.”

I held the same opinion.

All the victims apart from me hardly felt they'd been deceived. They'd either bought some cheap junk or a lucky charm at best. They knew what they were getting into when they made the purchase.

“A scam is only a scam with victims. If the ones in question don't think they've been tricked, then there's nothing we can do about it.”

“I agree with Kagurai-senpai.”

The motivation of the two who didn't know I was a victim blatantly fell. Well, naturally. As far as they could tell, the greatest damage was twelve hundred yen.

On top of that, no one was bothered.

No one was asking to be saved.

To these two with strong senses of justice, perhaps that was more important than anything. Seeing their reactions, only Orino-san who knew I'd been tricked looked a little pitiful.

“B-but it could be that the damages are just low for now, and there's a possibility the sum might start growing—”

“No, it's fine, Orino-san.”

Holding out my hand, I held her back.

“... Kagoshima-kun. Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It's kinda, just whatever.”

And, “I'm sorry I had you all waste your Saturday,” I apologized to everyone. I didn't say I had coincidentally met up with Tsuchimikado-san.

If I did, there might be some progress in the situation, but I didn't feel the motivation to.

Just, kinda...

I got the feeling the incident took place in a different world from these three. I doubted anything would come of me saying it.

No one apart from Kikyouin-san could resolve this case.

“I'll inform Kikyouin-san of the results of our investigation. I don't know if there's any point to it, but I don't want it to be wasted.”

That night.

Taking the urn I received as part of the investigation back home, I made a call to Orino-san. In order to tell her about Tsuchimikado-san, and about how he returned seventy thousand yen to me. For now, I told her not to worry.

Next I called Kikyouin-san. We exchanged numbers the day she came to my house.

About today's investigation, the present situation, how she was doing chasing down Tsuchimikado-san. There were plenty of things I wanted to say and ask.

“ ... ”

She blocked me.

Hugging my legs as I sat on the sofa, I held back some tears.

Chapter 5: Nine-Tailed Fox and Zashiki Warashi

The fair, gold pelted, jewel faced nine-tailed fox.

A demon fox who took on human forms, boasting golden fur and nine tails. Recorded to have slipped into the various dynasties of India, China, and Japan, she boasted powers equal to the gods, the strongest demon fox in history. She arrived in Japan around eight hundred years ago, taking the shape of a beautiful woman named Tamamo no Mae, slipping into the royal courts as the wife of former Emperor Toba.

But her true identity unraveled by onmyouji, she took flight. Afterwards, she appeared in Nasu perpetuating numerous evil deeds, but defeated before the army of eighty thousand men dispatched by Toba, she changed into the giant Sesshouseki.

“Tamamo no Mae is included in the ranks of the three great youkai of Japan. She’s a considerably famous monster.”

Once upon a time, Kai told me a story like that. Boasting a wide breadth of knowledge, whenever there was an opportunity, he would teach me various things; it’s just—whatever he told me, it was never about himself. Kai was consistent in that he never even tried to speak about himself.

“I see. I didn’t know about that. I thought the nine-tailed fox was something the author of Naruto thought up.”

“Haha. Well, I’m sure a lot of youths think that now. It’s not too rare for the parody to become more famous than the origin. The times are always changing.”

Kai spoke as if he had it all figured out. As if he had burned the changing times to heart time and again, he spoke in a profound tone.

“She’s a major youkai, so you can find as many legends and anecdotes as you want. And among them, one of them—tells that Tamamo no Mae had a daughter.”

“A daughter? When she’s a youkai, she can have a daughter?”

“It’s not strange for a youkai to have a daughter, is it? No matter what they do, it’s not strange: that’s what it means to be a youkai. For example, even if a Zashiki Warashi didn’t take on the form of a young boy, nothing would be strange.”

I guess he’s right, I assented.

After clearing his throat, Kai began narrating vividly.

“Once upon a time, there lived a fox, the strongest and vilest fox of them all. She was Tamamo no Mae, who continued bringing calamity to the world of humans, but even she had a daughter.

Shortly after her daughter was born, Tamamo no Mae was captured by a certain onmyouji clan. To make sure she could never commit evil again, she was sealed deep within their family shrine. The clan also placed a seal on Tamamo no Mae’s daughter. The girl had naught but been born, so a single collar was enough to seal her. And after some time passed, the girl said this.

‘Just once is enough, Can we meet our mother?’

The onmyouji answered.

‘Then for the next thousand years, you shall serve our clan.’

And the daughter served the clan.

To meet a mother she had never met before, the daughter did the best that she could.

The end.”

Phew, Kai let out a breath, “That’s a legend from around Kyoto,” he added on. If you’re wondering why I’m remembering this, on the way home from school, at the Inari Shrine I thought I’d drop by to plead a bit with god, I spotted a single young girl staring face to face with the statue of a fox.

“Tama-chan?”

She turned at my voice. A straw hat, and gold hair. A white one piece. It was Kikyouin-san’s little sister Tama-chan.

“What, so it’s you, whelp.”

“What’s up, Tama-chan? Why are you in a place like this?”

“... Tama-chan... hmph. So be it.” While she grated her teeth, she made a sound with her nose as if she had given up. “We came to pay respect to the Inari god. The god here also serves as the god of these lands. This is our-fashionably late-move-in greetings.”

“I see, you have it rough.”

Letting it go with a smile, I mused that she had been influenced by Kikyouin-san after all.

“Are you alone today? What about your big sister?”

“If you want Yuzuki, she’s off chasing the Tsuchimikado whelp alone. ‘I’ll settle it by myself this time,’ apparently. So we don’t know the specifics. Good grief, is this what they call the rebellious phase...”

... Kikyouin-san’s being treated at a rebellious age by her little sister. How sad.

“Ah, that’s right. Tama-chan, there’s something I want to ask you...”

“What?”

I swallowed my spit, hardening my resolve before asking.

“... Is it... true that you’ve changed Kikyouin-san’s diapers before...?”

“Yeah. We remember doing that.”

Tama-chan looked into the distance and easily nodded. So it was true... woah. All excuses were gone. I wanted it to be a lie.

“... Um, how long ago was it, specifically?”

“Well let’s see... it was when she was still a baby so... indeed. When you get past eight hundred, it all feels like just yesterday.”

“Yesterday!?”

How could it be... if had to be... yesterday, of all days.

Not some past mistake, or black history, it was an abnormal inclination that persisted into the present day...

“How nostalgic. We weren’t accustomed to it, so we had our share of troubles. When we got pee on our face, we really panicked for a minute there.”

“— !?”

The words of an old man falling into nostalgia had me trembling in fear. I

thought my goosebumps were so high the skin all over my body might lift off.
Pee, on her face...? Eeh? Yesterday... baby play... between sisters...
I frantically brushed away the concrete visual image that was about to be born
in my head. I-t's hopeless! She's so abnormal I can't keep up!
Don't think. Don't feel. You have to become insentient, me.
The realm of selflessness.

“... These days, Yuzuki only talks about you.”

As I began attaining unity with nature, Tama-chan spoke in a serious voice.

“Oh, Really?” That was a pleasant surprise. “What does she talk about?”
“Various things. But she always ends with the line, ‘He should go die in a ditch,’
tacked on.”
“... That so.”

Looks like she still hates me after all. I get the feeling she was so cruel that it
had to be the work of some evil spirit.
Even so, evil spirits... ghosts, huh?

“Hey, Tama-chan.”
“What is it?”
“Since when did Kikyouin-san start saying she could see ghosts?”
“There's no when to it, from the time she was born.”

I see, so from birth.
“So it's not like she had some sort of trauma or something.”
“Hmph. We cannot say she suffered no trauma.”

As she said that, Tama-chan's mouth curved. Unsuitable of a young girl, a deep
smile that let one feel the passage of many years.

“Yuzuki has talent, but a gift's link to an easy path is never guaranteed. From a
young age, she was suffering. Because she could see ghosts, those around her
always treated her like she was uncanny. Even if it may be the fate of an
onmyouji, 'tis a pitiful sight.”

Kikyouin-san's lonely eyes. As if she had no hopes to place on us, that
attitude.
—Well, whether you believe me or not doesn't really matter.

— It's not like anyone will believe you, and even if they do, they'll just find me creepy.

— When a photo's taken of me, it always winds up like this.

I got the feeling I could understand her reasons just a bit.

I'm sure when she placed her hopes, they were betrayed.

That's why she stopped hoping, and decided to accept it.

“The clincher was when she was eight. The game Kokkuri-san was gaining popularity with the kids.”

(TL: Basically, the Japanese equivalent of an Ouija board)

Kukkuri-san. I've played that one a few times before. In elementary school, everyone around me was doing it, so half for fun.

“Hah. There's no greater length in the foolishness of human entertainment. That one's a tried and true séance technique. If an amateur goes at it with superficial resolve, they'll draw low-grade ghosts and cause all sorts of trouble.”

And so, Tama-chan scoffed.

“Yuzuki, she—struck her classmates playing Kokkuri-san.”

“Wha...”

I was at a loss for words.

“You needn't even ask us the result. Ever since, Yuzuki was looked at with fearful eyes; without a friend, she lived on alone.”

I didn't know what to say.

It's not like the people playing Kokkuri-san had any ill intent. Just like me, they were playing half-for fun. And yet, if they're suddenly smacked, naturally they'd be irritated and find it creepy.

But.

I could see how Kikyouin-san felt.

I really don't believe in ghosts after all... but when it came to Kikyouin-san's sincerity towards occult events, she had gotten it across more than enough in these past few days.

Maybe it's precisely because she was who she was, that she couldn't forgive it.

A game like Kokkuri-san that stimulated the ghosts for fun.

“Well, all we can say is that Yuzuki was in the wrong. From those who live in a different world, ‘tis a mistake to expect anything.”

“Don’t...”

Don’t say something so sad...

“... What’s with those eyes? Do you have something to say?”

Sharply narrowing her fox eyes, Tama-chan flared at me. Unable to say anything in return, I just looked at the floor.

“Whelp, you’d best not approach Yuzuki with superficial feelings. Yuzuki is accustomed to loneliness. If you interact with half-baked resolve, you’ll only confuse her. The strength to live on her own is also something she must learn.”
“...”

If she wanted immature lines, I had plenty in stock. Like friends are wonderful, or humans can’t live on their own. But placed under Tama-chan’s youkai-like pressure, I couldn’t say anything. I ended up thinking this wasn’t something an outsider should stick his mouth into.

It’s just,

“... Then what about you, Tama-chan?”

I said.

“Us?”

“Kikyouin-san has you, doesn’t she? She’s not alone at all.”

I thought I was pointing out something terribly obvious, and yet Tama-chan looked like she was taken by surprise. After thinking a while, “... I see. That’s right,” she said.

“So Yuzuki... had us.”

“Oh? So that was the fair, gold pelted jewel faced nine-tailed fox—Tamamo no Mae’s daughter. I see, even if she’s sealed with that collar, she’s got a lovely aura. I guess it’s a matter of refinement?”

“Woah!”

After Tama-chan returned, a voice suddenly came from behind me.

“K-Kai... ah, you surprised me there.”

When I turned, my childhood friend gave a graceful smile. The word elusive described him perfectly. As long as I knew him, he was always suddenly appearing and suddenly disappearing.

“Kai. What do you mean Tama-chan’s the nine tailed fox?”

“Mn? Ah, no, no. I just said she has beautiful hair like the nine-tailed fox.”

What a strange way to praise her.

From there, in order to fulfill my initial objective of prayer, I stood at the offertory box with Kai. Inserting a ten yen coin (I could finally use money), I shook the bell left and right, and clapped my hands twice.

“What did you wish for, Akira?”

I thought a bit,

“For world peace,”

And lied. I kept my wish for Tsukimikado-san to be captured as a secret.

“I see. That’s a wonderfully good wish.”

Kai said with a cynical smile.

“So what did you really wish for? What do you want from the depths of your heart right now?”

“...”

He really says some insightful bullshit.

It was as if he could see through to the innermost thoughts even I didn’t understand.

“... I was wondering what to do about Kikyouin-san.”

I said, beaten by his persistence. After hearing this and that from Tama-chan, I was oblivious once more. I would probably never understand the darkness Kikyouin-san carried for the rest of my life. That was something for her alone, and something only she could understand.

In that case, what was I to do?

What was I capable of?

“Akira.”

Said Kai.

“You may not have noticed it, but you’re a surprisingly good guy, you know,”

His voice was gentle and clear.

“A good guy... a virtuous human can generally do anything, and it’ll turn out fine. If you do what you want the way you want it, generally speaking, someone will be happy.”

“.....”

“Of course, there are exceptions. There are people who miss the path precisely from their virtue, and idiots who misunderstand themselves as virtuous. But Akira, you’re different.”

“... Kai.”

“I’ve been watching you long enough. So—I can tell.”

As he said that, his smile was bitter and sweet, mysterious and captivating, and while it wasn’t by much, I couldn’t think it belonged to a human.

“It’s not like everything’s over just because you’ve failed. Whether it be human relations or anything else, there’s barely anything in this world that truly can’t be taken back, you know?”

So Akira, he looked straight at me.

“Just do what you want how you want to do it. If you fail, then you can try again then.”

Gray hair close to white, and gray kinagashi close to black.

As if to steal color from the worlds... a monochrome with no clear black or white.

I felt like I might be entranced by my childhood friend clad in a dubious air.

“If you fail, just try again, however many times it takes.”

I got the feeling a huge weight was lifted from my minds. Kai’s words had a strange power, seeping deep into the crevices of my mind.

Was this the weight of words Kurisu-chan was talking about?

“Thank you,” I said.

“Don’t mind it,” he laughed.

No matter how Kikyouin-san tried to avoid me, we were in the same class. Her blocking my calls still left me with ample opportunities to talk to her. Lunch break the next day, after she arrived late and took classes from the third period, I called her out behind the gym. It was something of payback for the day she transferred. First, to start the conversation, I asked why she was late.

“I fought with Tsuchimikado Senzou. He got away.”

Kikyouin-san said and shrugged his shoulders. Because Tsuchimikado-san was on the outskirts of town, she was late to school it seems. Tsuchimikado-san had walked all around town, selling his pots. He was quite an active conman.

“You don’t have to fall behind in schoolwork for my sake...”

“It ain’t for your sake.”

She said irksomely, clicking her tongue.

... “It’s not like I did it for you or anything”, could be called the representative line of all tsunderes, but I couldn’t feel the slightest hint of dere from the girl before me.

“So in the end, what did you call me out here for?”

“Umm, first off, can you unblock me?”

“No.”

“... Yeah. Then that’s fine. Let’s get into it.”

Somehow reinforcing my heart on the edge of collapse, I told her about our investigation. Everyone in the ComClub searched around town, and looked into the fraud. As expected, Kikyouin-san made a blatantly displeased face.

“... I said it, didn’t I? An amateur shouldn’t be stickin’ his head where it doesn’t belong.”

“I thought it would be the slightest bit helpful.”

“How stupid. Know the phrase misplaced kindness?”

Her smile was topped off with sarcasm. Looking down on me from top to bottom, a mean-spirited smile. But I didn’t let it slip by. In her eyes of contempt, the slight color of loneliness that surfaced.

After a breath, I spoke.

“You’re putting on the mean act to make sure we’re not dragged into trouble, right?”

“W-what?”

“Tsuchimikado-san’s objective is unknown, and no one knows what’s going on, so you thrust us away to protect us.”

“... No idea what you’re sayin’. How positive can ya be?”

Could her attitude that thrust others away be the flip side of kindness? That’s why I thought. I heard from Tama-chan about the Kokkuri-san.

She despaired for the great many and gave up on being accepted. But at the same time, could it be she reached a decision? In order to avoid harming uninvolved people, to be alone.

“You’re really annoying... you, and your friends in your club... just leave me alone. It’s not like any of you people understand a thing.”

She glared sharply at me. With sad eyes as if she didn’t expect a thing.

“I don’t need any friends. It’s pointless to make ‘em. I’ll only ever be able to reach an understandin’ with people who live in the same world as me.”

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s right.”

I said it lightly, purposely refraining from reading the mood. Perhaps that hit a nerve, as Kikyouin-san raised her voice.

“In that case...”

“But just because we can’t understand each other, that doesn’t mean we can’t be friends.”

That was surely addressed at myself. I had a few friends. For example, an upperclassman. For example, a classmate. For example an underclassman girl. And for example, my childhood friend.

They were all dear friends. But if you asked me if I knew everything about them, the answer was no. More so, I’m sure there was more I didn’t know. I’m sure there were more things I wanted to know. But, even so, that didn’t change that they were precious existences to me.

“You’re thinking too hard about it. Friends are just the people you go, hey

why don't we get along, to. Laugh together in the fun times, and that makes you friends."

"... I see. What light friendship. When we don't know a thing about one another, you say we're friends?"

"Yep."

"..."

"How much you understand one another isn't really important. It's far more important how much you treasure one another."

"... What's with that..."

Kikyouin-san hung her head, her eyes loitering around the ground.

"Then there's no point in making a friend like that... they won't be of any use at all."

"Yeah, well, let's see... for example, I'm absolutely no use at all. Even if you're troubled, I don't think I can help you."

"Now look at that. When you can't do a thing, you talk like—"

"I can't do anything, but I can cheer you on."

"..."

"I'll tell you to do your best. Is that not enough."

Kikyouin-san closed her eyes in silence. Her bangs fell over her face, so I couldn't tell her expression. In the end, the path I chose was to support Kikyouin-san. Her opinion that an amateur shouldn't stick his head where it doesn't belong was right. No matter how one works outside their expertise... how someone from a different world tries, it's pointless.

So I'll support her.

Sincerely, from the bottom of my heart.

Like the villagers who can only wait for the hero to defeat the demon lord and come home.

[IMAGE]

"Do your best, Kikyouin-san. If it's you, I'm sure you'll be able to take in Tsuchimikado-san. I believe in you."

"..."

She still wouldn't raise her face. Her mouth was sealed shut. The silence fell,

making it all seem a bit awkward. Alright, it's about time for me to break out the big guns.

"Umm, and so. Today, I prepared a present for you."

"A present?"

"While I say I'm supporting you, it sounds like a lie if it's just in words."

I said, as I took a paper bag from my bag.

It was Kagoshima Akira's present for troubled times strategy.

"... Hmm. Winning me over with gifts, your thoughts are so simple."

While she spoke harshly, she accepted the present relatively obediently. I'm sure there are no girls out there who wouldn't delight at receiving a present. Making a slight smile, Kikyouin-san pulled the contents from the paper bag.

The diaper I bought her.

"....."

Her expression froze over. With the diaper in hand, half out of the bag, she stopped moving as if time itself had stopped.

"No matter how much of a pervert you are, I'm your ally."

Yeah, a perfect strategy if I do say so myself. I made sure to call her out behind the gym, so no one would have to find out about her hobby.

"Use that and enjoy your baby play with Tama-chan to your heart's content. Well, it's a fetish I can't understand, but that doesn't mean we can't be friends."

Kikyouin-san was still frozen. I wonder why, could it be she was so happy she was overcome with emotion? Was she doing her best to hold in her tears?

.....

No, but.

I wonder what it is, this feeling that I messed it up at the end of the end? When I was just one step away, I got the feeling I had ruined everything.

"... What's wrong, Kikyouin-san? Ah, could it be you prefer Moony over

Pampers? I'm sorry. I hesitated over it, but..."

The next instant, Kikyouin-san finally moved. She moved quietly, fearsomely, faster than the speed of sound. By the time I noticed it, she had disappeared from my field of vision. Lightly, my body floated into the air. It took a few seconds before I realized she had swept my feet.

"... RinByouTouShyaKaiJinRekiZen."

A dark voice that seemed to resound from the depths of hell. At the edge of my rolling field of vision, I saw Kikyouin-san wrapping paper talismans around her own hands. It was like boxing tape, but to me, it looked more like knuckle dusters for some reason.

"Mother's signature—charm punch."

Domwaah.

An upper that could take the world exploded through my body. As if she had borrowed the power of the five elements to strengthen it, a fearsome fist.

In my fading consciousness, I learned regret. I knew I should've bought Moony.

Chapter 6: From Birth

The next day onwards, Kikyouin-san's attitude towards me became even worse. She would click her tongue every time our eyes met, and if I entered within a ten meter radius, she would go off somewhere far away. My heart was getting crushed, but... yeah. Well, whatever. I'm still cheering for you, you know that, Kikyouin-san?

With this and that, the case of fraud was nearing its end to me. Thanks to the returned seventy thousand yen, my sense of crisis as positive me had lifted away like the mist. As long as I economized, I'd surely be able to live until the next living expense shipment.

I thought, as I tried to return to my everyday life... and it was at that time.

"There's someone I want you to meet."

One day after school, I was called out by Orino-san. When I walked behind her, I found a black station wagon right outside the school gate. We both boarded the back seat.

"Huh? You can't see outside from this car at all."

All screens were smoke windows. There was a black wall with the drivers' seat as well, so I couldn't see the driver's face, or the scenery up ahead. Because of that, I got the feeling I was being isolated from the outside world.

"Y-you didn't know, Kagoshima-kun? Lately, these sort of cars are in fashion."
"Hmm. I see."

When I settled in my seat, the car instantly started.

"... I kinda get the feeling we've been driving in circles a lot."

"A-aren't you imagining it."

It was as if they were purposely taking a detour so I couldn't infer the location of our destination.

"So, Orino-san, in the end, where are we headed? Isn't it about time you told me?"

"It's a secret."

It was a question I asked a number of times, but she wouldn't tell me. I guess it doesn't matter. I'll know when we reach.

Another ten minutes later, the car finally stopped. I couldn't see outside, so I couldn't tell where we were in the slightest. Perhaps we had gone out of town. From the driver's seat, I heard only, "We're here."

When I tried getting off,

"Aah! W-wait, wait."

Orino-san let out a panicked voice. She started groping through her own bag. "H-huh...? It's not here, my blindfold isn't here... no way, I forgot it..." she muttered something to herself.

"Orino-san, I'll be getting down first."

"I'm telling you, wait! Please, I'm begging you!"

Hmmm. I wonder what's up.

Keeping her eyes trained on my, Orino-san began searching her own pockets and the seat, but it seems she was still unable to find what she was looking for.

"Uuurk... now that it's come to this..."

After mulling with an extremely troubled face,

"K-Kagoshima-kun, turn around."

She said. What is she even doing, I pondered as I turned around.

"W-who is it?"

I was blindfolded.

Soft, warm hands were draped over my eyes.

"....."

"....."

"... Orino-san."

"C-correct! It was me, Orino Shiori all along. You're amazing, Kagoshima-kun."

"... No seriously, Orino-san."

"..... I'm begging you here. I'm begging you, please don't say anything..."

Her voice was shaking. I was blindfolded so I couldn't see, but perhaps Orino-san was crying behind me. I wonder what she was trying to do... By so be it.

Orino-san says some strange things from time to time. If I start worrying about it, it's my loss.

After that, still under the effect of 'who is it?' I stepped down from the car and started walking.

"... Hey, Orino-san, how long are we doing this?"

"... This is my life's first and last wish, so please don't say anything..."

If it's her life's wish, then there's nothing I can do about it. I'll keep quiet. It was scary to walk around blind, but Orino said, "Turn right," "Now left", directing my head in the right direction, so I wasn't that hard pressed.

"Stairs, be careful."

At some point, the sensation under my feet changed from soft dirt to something hard. I stopped feeling the wind. It seems I had entered a room. After climbing and descending stairs,

"We're here."

The clicking sound of an opening door, I took a step in. It seems we'd finally reached our destination. The 'who is it?' ended and my sight was cleared.

"Orino-san, what's..."

When I turned, the door was already closed. Looking around, I was in a tasteless white room. When it was far more spacious than my own room, the lack of windows made it feel constricting. There were security cameras operational in the four corners of the room. In the center of the room was an isolated island of table and chairs, but nothing else to be found.

"I guess it's been a while. Kagoshima-kun."

The man in a suit sitting at the desk turned to me and said. I had some recollection of him.

"Masaki, san..."

It seems the person Orino-san wanted me to meet was Masaki-san (stage name). Last month, I was wrapped into a certain incident. Well, it might not be serious enough to call an incident, but I took part in the filming done by the

movie club Orino was part of at the spur of the moment. Masaki-san (stage name) was something of the boss character in the movie.

He betrayed the organization and carried out acts of terrorism, but was defeated by Orino-san (stage name Orino), and Kirako-san (stage name Kugayama), being dragged back to the organization in the end—was his role. According to Orino-san,

‘Masaki-san is a talent it would be too much a pity to lose, so he wasn’t disposed of. Of course, he wasn’t acquitted. His powers were sealed with electron cuffs, and he’ll be confined in the facility for a while—umm, how does that sound for an epilogue?’

Apparently.

“I just had to meet you face to face and apologize. I begged Orino to take you here.”

Masaki-san said as I sat across.

His grown-out beard had been shaved, and his carelessly long hair had been put in order with a buzz. Perhaps because of that, he gave off quite a different impression from before.

No, it wasn’t just his outer appearance. His menacing aura had vanished, and I felt that his entire atmosphere had softened up. But I guess that was obvious, back then, he was playing a part on camera, after all.

“I’m really sorry for what I did back then.”

Masaki-san deeply lowered his head. It was such an earnest apology, I ended up panicking.

“I-it’s fine. You don’t have to... and wait, I’m the one who just went and barged into your movie. I should be saying that to you.”

Masaki-san definitely tried to kill me, but that’s all the events of a motion picture.

“... So you really are like that. It’s just as Orino said,” Masaki-san gave a troubled smile. “But this is a problem of my own feelings. Something like settling the score.”

“I see, in that case, well... Um, so where are we right now, anyway?”

“The set for our next movie.”

Masaki-san slickly answered. I see, it's a set. Judging by the inorganic and cold atmosphere drifting through the room's entirety, it's supposed to be something like an empty space beneath a secret research facility.

“This club really is nice and proactive. The members all seem to get along well. Have you known each other a long time?”

“That's right. I've known Orino for around five years, I guess?”

“Five years, huh. Hmm. Orino-san, so you've been working on movies for five years.”

Five years would put her in elementary school. I guess she did her best as a child actor.

“No,” Masaki-san shook his head. “When I say five years, I mean the five years since I entered this movie club.”

He left a space before going on.

“Orino's been here since she was born.”

“... Since she was born?”

“Yeah. I'm part of the group who were gathered after their talents were discovered. Kuyagama's the same. But Orino's different. She was born and raised here.”

Both Masaki-san and Kugayama-san (Real name Kirako-san) joined later. But Orino-san... Orino Shiori was born and raised here.

...

So she's been in movies since she was a baby. Orino-san's amazing.

“... I'm sorry, could you keep that one a secret from Orino-san? That girl's convinced she was ‘brought here at a young age’.”

“Understood. Well, that sounds about right. It's a little embarrassing to see footage of yourself as a baby.”

“... Yeah, you're right.”

Masaki-san gave a bitter smile, before wearily narrowing his eyes.

“... Last month, during filming, do you remember how I used jamming equipment to seal away Orino-san's powers?”

“Yes. That scene left quite an impression.”

Masaki-san used a jamming device that only worked on specials to torment Orino-san. While that device was active, special class psychics weren't supposed to be able to use their abilities. And yet, even if it was just a small pebble, Orino-san managed to use psychokinesis.

That scene was burned hard into my brain.

I mean.

It was far too convenient of a development.

As if it was a movie.

“I thought there was a problem with my jamming equipment. It was a prototype, after all.”

But Masaki-san went on as if talking to himself.

“By the result of the higherup's investigation, there were no problems with that device.”

No problems with the equipment. Which means...

“... But if it's a movie, isn't it fine like that? When someone's in a pinch, their dormant abilities awaken, a common development.”

“... That's right. In a movie, I'm sure that would be fine.”

Masaki-san furrowed his brow, his expression turning grim. It was the face of someone who had seen firsthand an incomprehensible something he couldn't bring himself to fathom.

On the way back, I followed pretty much the same steps as when I came. The only difference was that Orino-san didn't do “‘who is it?’ for me. She bought a blindfold while I was talking to Masaki-san, apparently.

... No, I didn't find it disappointing or anything. I'm not sad about it at all.

I'm not thinking in the slightest what would happen if I suddenly stopped in a ‘who is it?’ state, and Orino-san ran into my back, what's more, her hands occupied with covering my eyes, she wouldn't be able to catch herself, inevitably having her press her chest up against my back. Perish the thought.

“... Hah.”

“Why do you look so disappointed...?”

Walking beside me, Orino-san asked perplexedly, so I told her it was nothing. After I hopped off the car at school, we started off home together. I didn't know where Orino-san lived, but it seems it was the same path halfway, so we accompanied one another.

“Ah, that's right, right. Since I'm here, I should give this to you.”

As she said that, Orino-san handed me an envelope. Its contents surprised me.

“... This is?”

“Kagurai-senpai entrusted it to me. Said she wanted you to hand it to Kikyouin-san.”

Oh I see.

I see. I guess Kagurai-senpai would do something like this.

“She has some novel ideas. But why me?”

“That's because Kikyouin-san hates you, right?”

“... I see.”

Come to think of it, the reason Kikyouin-san wouldn't enter the ComClub was because I was there...

“Yeah, got it. I'll do my best to be liked by Kikyouin-san.”

“... Y-you don't have to try that hard. Well, umm... if Kikyouin-san comes to like you for real, we'll have a huge mess on our hands... yeah. Kagoshima-kun, you're better off just a little bit hated.”

I got the feeling she just said something horrible to me, but, well, I'm sure it was my imagination. Tucking the envelope away in my bag, I started walking again.

“Hey, Akira.”

Without any forewarning, Kai suddenly appeared. As elusive as a youkai, by the time I noticed it, he was sitting on the guardrail in front of me.

“What’s up, Kai? It’s rare to see you in a place like this.”

“Just out on a walk. No, maybe a patrol.”

I’ve been getting a bad feeling about this town lately, he added on something incomprehensible as he walked over to me.

“Akira. Who’s this cute little lady?”

“Eh, oh me?”

At the sudden compliment, Orino-san’s cheeks turned red. So even poser lines don’t sound creepy if Kai’s the one saying it. I see. So this is the, ‘must be said by a hottie’ guarantee.

“Orino-san. Orino Shiori-san. She’s my classmate, and the class rep.”

I introduced her without beating around the bush, and Orino-san lightly lowered her head.

“And this is Kai. Shinose Kai. My childhood friend.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Orino Shiori-san.”

Kai smiled wide. In contrast, “Ah, yes. A pleasure...” Orino-san made a puzzled face for some reason. Still with that look on her face, she turned towards me.

“So Shinose-kun is your childhood friend...?”

“Yeah. That’s right... is something wrong?”

“... Kagoshima-kun, weren’t your childhood friends Daiki-kun and Yoshiko-chan?”

Daiki-kun?

Yoshiko-chan?

“Who?”

“Huh... didn’t you tell me about it some time ago? That those two were the ones you always played with...”

“Did I...? No, I don’t remember that...”

I wonder what it is, this feeling that something’s out of place. Like some discrepancy was born in our recollection of events.

Was Orino-san remembering something wrong?

My only childhood friend is Kai.

A dubious air began flowing between the three of us—at that moment.

“RunByouTouShaKaiJinRetsuZaiZen— Rai!”

A familiar cry echoed through the air, as lightning raced across the sunset sky. And a few dozen meters ahead, from the roof of the tightly packed buildings ahead, a single shadow quietly leapt down to the asphalt.

It was Kikyouin-san. She was wearing the onmyouji costume I’d seen sometime before.

“Aah, god! That blasted Tsuchimikado Senzou... he used his shikigami as a decoy to get away.....”

She irritatedly muttered as her sharp eyes glared at what should be empty space.

“... She’s always letting loose, that Kikyouin-san.”

“Hmm,” Kai beside me let out a breath of admiration. “One of the twelve heavenly generals, prepared by the great onmyouji Abeno Seimei, Touda. All the twelve generals should be with Seimei’s direct lineage, the Tsuchimikado House, so why is it in this town...”

“Huh? Did you say something?”

“No, I was just wondering if that cute girl over there is also an acquaintance or yours.”

“That’s Kikyouin-san, the transfer student. I told you about her, right?”

“Ah, I remember... I see, so that’s how it is.”

He found understanding on his own, smiling as if he had a grasp on everything.

“The ones fighting Touda are... three pipe foxes, eh? I see. Quite fitting for the clan possessed by the kitsune. That being the case, they’re at a disadvantage against one of the twelve generals... if Tamamo no Mae’s daughter was here, it’d be an easy win... but it doesn’t look like she’s anywhere around.”

Kai started whispering some incomprehensible things, so I peeked at Orino-san.

“What... are those monsters...”

Her eyes were open wide, her face pale.

“Monsters? What are you talking about, Orino-san?”

“They’re right there, aren’t they... a red snake as large as an anaconda, and three white foxes floating in the air...”

“?”

“You can’t see them... Kagoshima-kun...?”

“So you can see those, Orino Shiori, san?”

“... See them or not, when they’re that vivid... but Kagoshima-kun says he can’t see... then what Kikyouin-san’s fighting right now... really is...”

When I was about to call out to Orino-san in her confusion,

“Ow!”

Kikyouin-san crumbled to the ground. Rather than taking on an attack, her way of falling was more like she had put too much force into her dodge, and fallen over as a result.

“Hey, are you alright!?”

Orino-san raced over to Kikyouin-san.

“... Why are you here...?” she muttered as she shifted her eyes to me. “That idiot too... ah, whatever, do what you want, just move. You’re in the way.”

Pushing Orino-san aside, Kikyouin-san stood to her feet. Still gazing into empty space, she took a number of paper charms from her breast pocket. RinByouTouSha, she chanted the nine characters and kicked the ground.

“So... Kikyouin-san really was the real deal...”

Orino-san stood on the spot, her expression a blend of shock and acceptance. And she hurriedly turned towards me.

“Sorry, Kagoshima-kun. I have some secret business with Kikyouin-san, so could you go on without me?”

Not giving me time to respond, Orino-san leapt out. As if she was using

psychokinesis on her own body, a leg strength I would never expect from a high school girl.

“Akira, let’s go.”

When I mulled unable to follow the situation, a hand was placed on my shoulder.

“Kai... are you sure?”

“It’s fine. From what I could see, that shikigami... Touda wasn’t ordered to kill anyone. It was summoned with the sole purpose of stalling for its summoner. No need to worry, no one’s dying.”

“Eh?”

“Oh, slip of the tongue. Yeah,. Well, don’t worry about it. Women have a world of their own. Us men can’t step into girl’s talk, can we?”

Kai continued tugging at my arm. As always, I didn’t get a single thing he was thinking, but I decided to quietly follow along. There was still something pulling at me, I ended up turning around.

There was considerable distance between us now. Only the shouts Kikyoin-san scattered barely entered my ear.

“... Huh? You... what, that... psyc—wers...? Those —ly exi—fool! You can’t hit a spiritual body with a rock, I don’t know about—chokenisis or whatever — stay out, ama—r!”

My heart was astir. I couldn’t just let myself be taken away by Kai.

“Ah. Oy, Akira.”

Shaking off his hand, I raced towards Orino-san and Kikyoin-san. Returning halfway down the path I came... and it was then. In my distant view, Kikyoin-san gave a strong wave of the hand holding her charms. Not to stop an enemy blow, it was a gesture to parry it.

That motion was a moment too late, and on, the three-story multi-residence building to my right, a portion of the concrete on the third floor was indented in a spherical shape.

“Eh?”

By the time the destructive sound made me look up on reflex, it was already

too late.

The countless fragments of glass covering up my entire field of vision. The reiteration of countless glimmering diffused reflections fell in accordance with the earth's law of gravity.

Nowhere to run, no time to try.

The rain of glass came down on me.

“Good grief, you really are a handful.”

What entered my ears was the same quiet and gentle voice of my childhood friend as ever.

He was laid-back, showing not a shred of panic, as he lightly waved his hand. With that alone, I felt as if space creaked, time distorted, and the world bent out of place. My body was surrounded in a sweet, gentle light.

I was taken aback. It seems I lost consciousness for a few moments.

“... E-eh? -huh?”

Still confused, I gazed over my body.

I was unharmed. Not a scratch.

Following on, I slowly expanded my field of vision. Over the surrounding asphalt, the glass fragments that fell from the building were scattered. Only around me, as if a hold had been opened in the rain, there wasn't a single piece to be found.

“Akira, are you hurt?”

Avoiding the glass, Kai approached. There was a sense of fatigue and relief on his face. As if he used some sort of special power and exhausted himself.

“... I'm fine. Looks like none of them hit.”

“Hmm. That's some amazing luck you've got. A miracle, I'd say.”

“Yeah. Thank god, I've still got it.”

“You're one lucky devil, you.”

I borrowed Kai's hand to stand. To get out unharmed after facing such an accident, I really am lucky. I must have some good karma.

"Making that laid-back face. Not knowing the effort that took—"

Stopping her words part-way, Kai gazed at a single point. At the end of my vision were Kikyouin-san and Orino-san. The two of them were no longer gesturing of fighting something.

"You... what did you do?"

Kikyouin-san said as if she was giving a cross-examination.

"I don't know... it was the heat of the moment..."

Orino-san answered with intermittent words.

"Without using a spell, to directly interfere with a spiritual body and revert it... not even Abeno Seimei could do that... so Psychokinesis can even do something like that?"

"I don't know... I mean, today was the first time I ever saw something like that."

I felt like something was over. And yet, on their two expressions, I couldn't pick up the slightest hint of victory.

"Orino Shiori. Hmm."

To my side, Kai hummed a note.

His eyes colored by hues of intrigue were focused on a single point the whole time. As she gazed at her own hand, an anxious look on her face, at Orino-san.

Chapter 7: Close Sisters

After school the next day, I called Kikyouin-san to my house. I had to hand over what Orino-san entrusted to me. With a tendency to hate me, naturally Kikyouin-san was furiously opposed.

“Definitely not! ‘n wait, don’t talk to me. I seriously want nothin’ to do with you.”

“Baby play.”

“...! W-when do you want me there...”

So well, with the power of the magic words, it worked out some way or another.

... It’s occurred to me that this might be why her hate for me grows.

Regardless, Kikyouin-san came to my house.

“... So what do you want?”

Sitting on my sofa, folding her legs, she sipped at the tea I put out-making no attempt to hide her irritation as she glared at me. If I did anymore unnecessary stuff, I got the feeling something terrible would happen to my affection points, so I swiftly informed her of my business. I gently placed a single envelope on the table. Kikyouin-san took it in hand, gazing at it inquisitively.

“Open it up,”

I urged, so she reluctantly flipped it open.

“... T-this is.”

Her eyes opened wide.

Inside the envelope was the photo we took the other way. But it wasn’t a ghost photo. Kagurai-senpai had her legs, Orino-san had her arms, there were no ghosts next to Kurisu-chan, and I still had my head.

“Kagurai-senpai digitally corrected it,”

With her level of skill, this much was a midday snack.

While Kikyouin-san gazed perplexed at the picture, she eventually noticed the

surprise on the back as well. The back side was a collection of messages.

‘Is this really all that was bothering you?’ said Kagurai-senpai.

‘I’m scared of ghosts, but I’m not scared of you,’ wrote Kurisu-chan.

‘If you want to join, just do it,’ from Orino-san.

‘Isn’t it about time you unblocked me?’ said I.

The ComClub’s messages to their new member candidate.

It wasn’t much. It just meant I wasn’t the only one worried about Kikyouin-san. After staring at the photo a while, Kikyouin-san drew her eyebrows together worryingly.

“... And so what? You’ll go this far to make me a member? You all must really value that club room.”

“Yeaah, well, that’s part of it, but...”

“But what?”

“Everyone’s too kind, you know.’

Of course, the desire to make Kikyouin-san a club member was more or less calculated in, but the greatest reason was surely because they couldn’t leave her be.

In the end, those girls are all good people; like those heroes of justice that show up in manga and TV.

“... Hmph. So that club’s a gathering of nosy busybodies.”

“Right you are. So isn’t it perfect for you?”

“...”

“Whether you join the club or not is up to you. But we want to get along with you regardless..

It’s a hunch, really just a hunch, but I got the feelings those girls would be able to be her friends. Everyone has their own circumstances. Things they can’t say, and things they want to keep hidden. But that’s no reason not to be friends. Perhaps it’s precisely because we’re humans that can’t understand one another, that there are things we can understand.

“... I’ll consider it.”

She lightly muttered, before putting the picture away in her bag. Treating it extremely precious. Looking on the scene, I felt warm. I couldn’t stop my

grinning. Grin, grin, grin.

“What are you smiling about, it’s creep—mn?”

Kikyouin-san suddenly noticed something.

“Why do you have two of those urns?”

Her eyes locked onto the two urns that decorated the top of the shelf.

“Oh, I got it from someone the other day.”

I told her about our previous investigation. About how, when we were looking for people who bought urns, one of them got it for free, and it ended up in my hands for the time being.

“You mean someone got it free of charge...? This is getting more and more incomprehensible. That Tsuchimikado Senzou... what exactly is he trying to do?”
“Ah, that’s right. Since you’re here, do you want to see the results of our investigation?”

With everything going on, I had yet to show her. She’s here anyway, so let’s show her. I took out the town map and my notes I’d tucked away on the shelf and unfurled them on the table.

“Hmm. So you came in contact with the victims...”
“Come to think of it, how were you chasing Tsuchimikado-san anyways?”
“Using a search spell sequence, I chased after his spiritual energy. That’s the most efficient way to do it. But right now, he’s got a jamming sequence up and we’re playing cat and mouse. The way he can slip away means he must have a rough idea of where I am, though.”

A search sequence. Was it some sort of divination? To divine out the opponent’s location, some sort of amazing battle was going on.

“... Good grief, what sort of idiot said the Tsuchimikado third son was a failure? At the point he could fight on an even level with me, there’s no way he had no talent.”

Spitting out loathsome words, Kikyouin-san looked down over the map on the table.

The map showed where we had searched and marked out the locations of the

house that fell victim. I thought I'd use police dramas as reference, and mark down the location of the crimes.

There were five black marks in total.

"Is there anything like a pattern...?"

I could see no uniformity in the victims or the amounts paid. I could only think he wandered at random, working his scams when he got in the mood.

"No clue... what's that guy tryin' to accomplish, repeating these shoddy scams... if he wanted to make a quick buck, there are plenty of other ways he coulda gone about it..."

"Yeah," I groaned as I looked at the map again.

If this was a manga, it would probably end up that Tsuchimikado-san was using the whole town to draw a magic circle or something. For now, I tried proposing.

"Could he have been using the whole town to draw a giant magic circle? How about it?"

"Not possible. That's the first thing I considered."

So she thought about it. We're kinda in sync here.

"A sehman five-pointed star being drawn to cover an entire city, it's happened a few times in the past. But in that case, the cardinal points would have to be these urns, and if he wanted to do that, he wouldn't do something as irresponsible as leave his customers to their own devices after the urns were sold."

"..."

"n wait, the fact there are two here means he's already failed. He had no way of telling what'd happen to the other urns either. The buyers might toss or smash them."

I said it as a joke, but she took it quite seriously.

"As I thought, thinking's not going to get him everywhere. If we catch him, we can drag it outta him personally."

"... You're right. I'm sure Tsuchimikado-san was just walking around sightseeing."

"Exactly. Walking all over the place like an idiot...?"

Her words stopped half-way.
Kikyouin-san touched a hand to her mouth, gazing at the map as if something had caught her up.

“... That’s right. Why was he wandering around the town, one end to another..... when he went all the way to the outskirts, yesterday he returned to this area...”

“Isn’t that... because Tsuchimikado-san’s a carefree person? He didn’t act with thorough planning, so he went back and forth all over town...”

“... Back and forth... meaning zigzagged?”

Still gazing at the map, Kikyouin-san began thinking with an overly serious face.

After around a minute of thought,

“... I’ve got it!”

She cried out.

“It’s uho, uho! God, why didn’t I notice it until now!? This is uho!”

“...”

“Uho! I finally get Tsuchimikado Senzou’s objective! He was doing the uho, the uho!”

In a mixture of the joy of figuring it out, and the irritation at never noticing before, she continued crying out with a conflicted face.

I was troubled how to respond.

Why was she suddenly shouting uho...

Did she start imitating a gorilla or something? Or could it be she learned from Tama-chan, and was trying to establish herself as a character with a verbal tic? Alright, as a friend, I must save Kikyouin-san from the path of evil.

“Now look here, Kikyouin-san. A character isn’t made by the way they speak—”

“Snap out of your idiocy and look at this!”

Rejecting my teachings of good will, Kikyouin-san raced her pen over the map.

“Uho is a walkin’ technique utilized by onmyouji. By stepping in a zigzag pattern, it brings about a purifying effect. Tsuchimikado is doing it on a super

large scale.”

Once she finished drawing over the map, she slammed it down on the table. On it, apart from the five points I drew in, she added another four.

“What are these four points?”

“It’s quite likely that Tsuchimikado sold his urns in those four places as well. That’s right, if it’s uho, that explains everythin’. Why the prices were cheap, and why someone got it for free, it’s because his objective wasn’t money, it was to ‘transfer the spell-imbued urns to another’... The reason he walked over town was because the order in which he sold them in was important...”

The five victims we looked into, and the extra four Kikyouin-san presumed. Those nine points linked in a zigzag to form a thorny path.

“I see... if he wanted to draw a circle, then his starting point would have to be his ending point, so he’d be easy to predict. But uho is different... he made ‘transferring a spell urn to another’ represent one step in uho...”

She grated her teeth in irritation.

“This is Tsuchimikado Senzou’s original craft based on the traditional system... dammit, it was a complete blind spot. I knew he wasn’t incompetent, but to think he had enough talent to devise a completely new technique...”

She muttered to herself as she stood, heading for the front door in hot haste.

“Wait a second, Kikyouin-san! What exactly is Tsuchimikado-san trying to do?”

“Tsuchimikado Senzou is—doing a clean sweep of all the youkai in this town.”



Turning to my voice, Kikyouin-san raised her voice in impatience.
A clean sweep of the youkai?

“Umm, I don’t really get it, but isn’t that a good thing?”
“... It’s not that simple. At the very least, there’s no way such a rough method will turn out well... whatever the case, I’m going to stop him!”

No more time to spare, Kikyouin-san leapt out, and I was left alone.
I did want to chase her, but even if I did follow, I doubted there was anything I could do. For some reason, that was the feeling I got.
But I’d believe in her and wait.
That was surely all I could do.
Do your best, Kikyouin-san.

“Oy, whelp.”
“Woah!”

As I entrusted my body weight to the sofa, narrowing my eyes to the brightness of the evening sun, absorbed in the cool act I put on, a low voice dragged my back to reality.

“T-Tama-chan...”

Before I noticed it, Tama-chan was sitting on the opposite sofa. She was sipping on the tea Kikyouin-san left behind.
Ah, that was a surprise. To suddenly be there as if that’s where she was supposed to be, that’s an appearing act on Kai’s level.

“Do you know where Yuzuki is?”

I told her she was just here, but not anymore.

“You just passed her by. Did you hear something from your big sister?”
“Nothing at all. This time, Yuzuki hasn’t told us a single thing,” Tama-chan made just a slightly lonely face. “Even if we want to chase, she’s making sure we can’t pick up her power. Hmph, just what is she thinking...”
“I see, you’re feeling lonely because your big sister kept you out of the loop.”
“Wha? W-wrong, fool! Who’s lonely!? We doth be a demon fox with eight hundred years under our belt.”
“Yeah, yeah, you’re right. So that’s the setting you use when you play with your big sister.”

With these sorts of things, it’s cute when they’re still around her age, I

thought as I reached my hand to pet her head, only for 'something' to smack me. For a moment, I picked up the sensation of an animal's fluffy tail or something of the sort. Or perhaps not...

"Fool. Don't touch us so easily... hm? This is..."

Tama-chan noticed the town map on the table.

"... This is uho, it is. It's the first time we're seeing one so large."

"Oh, your big sister drew that."

I told her everything I heard from Kikyouin-san (I didn't understand it myself, so I told her exactly how I heard it). Once she finished listening, "Hmph," Tama-chan rung her nose disinterestedly.

"I see. So this is why the town's youkai were so boisterous. That Tsuchimikado whelp's thought up something stupid. But to come up with a new technique... we never thought he was such a talented onmyouji."

She spoke in an unchildlike cynical tone.

"No matter, the most this spell will do is weaken the town youkai. Does he plan to weaken them and hunt them down one by one...? But with such forceful means... hmph. Whatever shall be. Oy, whelp."

She looked up at me with her fox eyes.

"Take us where Yuuki is."

She said.

"No I apologize, but I don't know where Kikyouin-san went."

"Here," Tama-chan pointed at the map. It was a point smack dab in the center of the formation called uho. "This is the heart of uho. At the end of the ceremony, the practitioner will have to be here. The Tsuchimikado whelp is here. Therefore, Yuzuki must have headed there as well."

That place was a few kilometers walking distance from my house. A natural park. Far from former-Gentle Breeze park, instead of playground equipment, it was a spot for one to enjoy a playful walk through the woods.

"We can get there alone, but if we use any power, Yuzuki might notice."

Meaning she wanted to secretly tail her big sister to surprise her. Is that what she meant?

As we got closer to the natural park, there were fewer and fewer people around. “A crowd clearing barrier. Well, as long as you’re with us, it shouldn’t be a problem. Mind it now, keep going whelp,” Tama-chan muttered something incomprehensibly, but it didn’t seem to have anything to do with our current situation. As we walked weaving our way between the trees, we came out into an open space. A large surface covered in turf, it was the sort of open space that made me want to play frisbee with a dog.

“...! Hide yourself, whelp.”

Right before I could step into the opening, Tama-chan grasped my head. With physical strength unthinkable of a child, no a human, she forcefully dragged me into a nearby thicket.

Tama-chan’s strong!

“They’ll notice if we get any closer. Let us watch from here.”

As I followed Tama-chan’s line of sight, I found Tsuchimikado-san and Kikyouin-san. Tsuchimikado-san’s hand gripped his khakkhara, and whenever he lowered it, it would let out a clear jangling sound. I wasn’t sure when she had time to change, but Kikyouin-san was in her onmyouji costume. She spread out charms in both hands like folding fans.

They both seemed exhausted, their shoulders rising with each breath.

“Don’t get in my way! Kikyouin laaasssyyy!”

“Settle down already! Tsuchimikado third son!”

The two howled.

One tore through the air with his staff, the other stroked the air with her charms.

There were around ten meters between them. At the half-way point—a strange sound. Only there, as if the density of the atmosphere thickened, I felt a strange off-sensation.

“Hmm. Yuzuki has the slight advantage in battle. It seems the Tsuchimikado whelp has the higher spiritual power, but right now, he’s pouring it into the uho. Hmph. Whatever the case, it looks like it was a lie when they said

Tsuchimikado Senzou was a blockhead. Did he play the jester at the main house?”

Tama-chan hiding with me started an extremely appropriate-sounding commentary. She was like the announcer character from a shounen manga.

“You know, Tama-chan...”

Can you say it so I can understand? Why are those two dancing? Is it a ritual of reunion passed down in the family for generations? I wanted to ask this and that, but,

“What humans and youkai seek is coexistence! Why can’t you get that!?”

Kikyouin-san’s scream made me direct my attention elsewhere.

“Onmyouji exist as the balancers. I can’t feel a hint of pride as an onmyouji from your plan! To sweep away the youkai, there’s no way that will go down well!”

“... Hah. No one thinks it’ll go well the first time. I plan to repeat it again and again, raise the precision, and perfect this new technique.”

“Whatever the case, it’s a mistake! Standing between human and youkai, becoming the link between them’s what it means to be an onmyouji!”

“An answer straight from the textbooks. You must be an honor student.”

Spinning his staff, Tsuchimikado-san gave a belittling laugh.

“And then what? You going to prance back home with your head high, dealing only with the rich who come to you, eh? Are you, lassy?”

“.....”

“I hated the Tsuchimikados from the start. Detested them. They’re a house that prospers, sellin’ favors to the country’s big shots. All the troublesome exterminations ‘re pushed to the branch families, while they lay cockily on their backs, made me wanna vomit. You had your troubles two, right? You’re the ‘clan possessed by the kitsune’ after all.”

“...”

Kikyouin-san furrowed her brow and bit her lip. Tama-chan beside me also made an unpleasant, sorrowful, conflicted face.

“That’s why I left the house. And I was surprised. The people of this country,

they're knowledge on apparitions is way too faint. Did you know there are loads of people out there who don't even know which direction the demon gate is?"

"... And what about it? Are you telling me you wandered to protect people from youkai-related troubles? You're telling me you played at being some sort of hero of justice?"

"That's right. Somethin' wrong about that?"

At the answer he breathed as if it were natural, Kikyouin-san lost her words.

"Is there something wrong about doin' your best for the people 'n the world, unbeknownst to all? Lassi."

There's no way that's wrong.

I thought so too. Likely Kikyouin-san as well, she could no longer connect her next utterance.

"I've chosen to see youkai as evil. That might be a mistake, but as long as the humans find happiness from it, I don't mind."

I couldn't really tell what Tsuchimikado-san was trying to do. But he did have a single conviction that made his core. For the sake of all humans. For the happiness of people he would never know. Throwing away his pride, going as far as scamming, there was something he wanted to accomplish.

"... Hmph."

Receiving Tsuchimikado-san's eyes that gave off his conviction,

"How idiotic,"

After a while of silence, Kikyouin-san finally opened her mouth.

"I don't give a damn about your circumstances. 'n wait. To be real blunt here, I was never real interested in an onmyouji's pride, or the family teachings. It all reeked of old age, like a history drama. I'm honestly sick of them."

Haah, she took an exaggerated sigh, languidly continuing on.

"Well, no matter what we do, in the end, we can only stand on the human's side. The way you think ain't bad. There are more youkai out there that bring harm to humans than not, so even if you indiscriminately slaughter them, look at the whole, and you'll wind up with a positive."

“... Oh? What’s this, lassy. So you do get it. You tellin’ me you’ll lend this poor soul a hand?”

“Stuuupid. Why would I want to do something like that... I don’t have a grand goal or just cause like you. Justice? I don’t intend to say something that reeks of hypocrisy—but you see,”

Kikyouin-san spoke. Her sarcastic smile vanished, her eyes filled with resolve.

“If you finish your new technique in this town, you’ll be botherin’ my family. So I’ll oppose you, and I’ll stop you. That’s all there is to it.”

Kikyouin-san’s family. Was she talking about Tama-chan? If Tsuchimikado-san completed his uho (which I still didn’t really get) would something inconvenient happen to Tama-chan.

“... Hmph, that brat. She’s learned how to speak... Hmm? What’s wrong, whelp?”

“No, I just thought you looked happy.”

“Hah!? We’re not happy in the slightest!”

Yeah, she really is cute, Tama-chan.

As I was deeply impressed by the cuteness of a young girl, Tsuchimikado-san clanged his staff down.

“Yeah, yeah, I see. Come to think of it, the Kikyouin House is keeping a single preposterous monster on board. Hah. Don’t lead me on, lassy. You coulda just started with that.”

His words gradually increased in weight. Tsuchimikado-san’s frivolous atmosphere gradually weightened, grew thicker.

“Good grief. Ever think of making a main house from your branch family?”

“If that makes you skulk home, I wouldn’t mind considering it.”

“That’s a no go. Well, let’s get this battle going, eh? Kikyouin Yuzuki.”

“Don’t look down on me too hard, Tsuchimikado Senzou.”

For a few seconds, the two glared at one another. Neither side made a move. Another few seconds. Simultaneously kicking the ground, they moved at once. And then—a few minutes.

The two continued their battle.

When pantomime was supposed to be the more practical expression, why did I want to express it as a 'battle'? The air shook, the earth tremored, charms flew, the staff chimed, and at the end of a fierce clash of invisible somethings. The one standing was Kikyouin-san.

"... God dammit."

Face flat on the grass, Tsuchimikado-san loathsomely spat it out. According to commentator Tama-chan.

"As I thought, the deciding factor was the power that Tsuchimikado whelp was dividing off to his new technique. Hmm. In spellcasting, the most important part is the prep work. Yuzuki prepared solely to stop Tsuchimikado, and chose her spells and equipment for that purpose, so you could say her victory was inevitable."

Apparently.
Though I didn't really get it.

"For now, is it over?"
"If it is, that was a let down. We had no reason to worry and come out to see her... for someone capable of devising a new technique, we thought it would be difficult for Yuzuki alone, but..."

Despite what she said, Tama-chan really did come out of worry. She's a girl who cares for her big sister.
Kikyouin-san approached a Tsuchimikado-san who was out of power and unable to stand. With uneasy steps, she showed she was considerably worn herself.

"For now, we'll be good if I seal you off, right? As long as I don't let you it to that area under the large tree with the sehman star carved out, the last step of the uho won't be completed."

She looked at a tree in the distance before looking back to Tsuchimikado-san at her feet.

"What are you goin' ta do? If you swear you'll never do it again, I'll keep quiet to the main house. I'll let you off."

Her tone was light as if to imply, though I don't care either way.
... I know I shouldn't be saying it at a time like this, but Kikyouin-san's

completely forgotten about me, hasn't she. She said she'd get back five thousand yen.

"... Keh. You're strong, lassy. As expected of that Kikyouin House's eldest daughter..."

Without getting up, Tsuchimikado-san simply continued to loathsomely spit words.

I'm sure he was just being a sore loser. Cynicism without any point or meaning.

"I expected no less of the clan who deceived the lone daughter of Tamamono Mae and worked her to the bone."

That's why.

There was no meaning to his words.

"Why you're the ones who slaughtered the fair gold pelted jewel faced nine tailed fox, you boldly make use of her daughter. No, no, I must tip my hat to our branch family."

Kikyouin-san—nodded.

She—affirmed it.

She didn't deny.

"Even if it's something the house started generations ago, that doesn't change that we continue deceiving Tamane-sama to this day... I do think it's bad. Tamane-san still believes..."

A masochistic smile plastered on her mouth, Kikyouin-san responded to Tsuchimikado-san.

"... What could they be talking about, Tama-ch—!"

A shiver ran down my spine.

Tama-chan was making an unthinkable face.

Her wide open fox eyes. In their depths, I couldn't sense the slightest strand of light. Unthinkable for the face of a young girl, nay a human, an expressionlessness with an inhuman coldness.

"E... eh? H-huh?"

By the time I noticed it, Tama-chan had vanished. I timidly surveyed the area,

only to find her standing right beside Kikyouin-san and Tsuchimikado-san. When I thought she had disappeared, she was already somewhere else. Like a ghost, like a youkai, the movements of an apparition.

“... Yuzuki. Is that true?”

Tama-chan said. In a low, low voice.

Noticing the existence of the young girl, the exhausted two were taken aback.

“T-Tama-ne-sa-ma... why...”

Kikyouin-san’s voice was shaking. Her face was as pale as a corpse. She had likely never expected Tama-chan to be here.

“... So that’s it. That’s why you decided to do everything without relying on us this time around. Was it because the enemy was the Tsuchimikado third son who knew the truth?”

“... T-that’s...”

“So mother is—dead.”

Tama-chan looked up at the sky. As if her soul was being sucked away, a face without a sense of life.

“... What a farce. So all this time, mother’s enemies were leading us by the nose. For over eight hundred years, solely to meet our mother, we endured...” She touched the necklace hanging at her chest. “We even put on something so boorish for them... what part of it, what part was supposed to be family...”

Her necklace began to grate.

“Tamane-sama! Cease this at once! If you force off that necklace—”

“Silleeeennnce!”

Her heartbroken scream thundered out. Not taking her hands from her necklace, she gripped it with brute force. Perhaps from that, the nails of her small hands peeled, her skin tore. Even so, Tama-chan wouldn’t take her hands off the necklace.

“We won’t believe another word from your mouth! Won’t believe a thing! How dare you, how dare you, how dare you, how dare you, how dare you... aaAAAAAAAHH—!”

Click.

The neckless fell at Tama-chan's feet.

And...

Kooooon.

It was the fox.

The cry of a fox.

It sounded like an animal's cry, and an animal crying as well.

Cold. It felt almost as if the temperature sank around ten degrees. And yet, an ominous sweat began to ooze all over my body.

Tama-chan took a step forward.

Her straw hat shot off, while the back portion of her one piece swayed up violently.

"KyAAAH!" "GWAAAH!"

The next moment, as if hit by a blast wave, Kikyouin-san and Mikado-san were sent scrolling a few meters over the grass.

"..."

Tama-chan didn't say a word. She simply stared at the two with cold eyes.

"What monstrous power... my body is frozen, it won't move... so this is Tamane... I can't even stand before her..."

As Tsuchimikado-san said, the two had already used up their strength couldn't move. With an absolute, overwhelming force before their eyes, it seems they couldn't move a single muscle.

[IMAGE OF TAMA-CHAN FLOATING WITH NINE TAILS AND DEAD EYES]

"Please, Tamane-sama!" Kikyouin-san said from the ground, "Listen to me! Please!"

"It's pointless, lassy. That fox's been completely eaten up by her own power. She's been sealed so long, what's build up is exploding out... haha... this blasted tongue of mine. I'm sorry about this, Kikyouin lassy."

"Tamane—sama... Tamane-sama!"

Ignoring the apology from Tsuchimikado-san who had given up on everything,

Kikyouin-san called out wholeheartedly. The name of her family.

“...”

Quietly. Tama-chan lifted her hand.

With that alone, the sky above her darkened as boisterous rain began coming down.

“... Oy, oy, for real? Even the heavens are at her beck and whim...”

The black clouds began to rumble.

“T-that technique... it can't be.”

“What, you know something about it!?”

“... I heard about it before. Around a hundred years ago, when Tamane-sama accompanied the Kikyouin-san head of five generations ago to China, the Heavenly Lord of Universal Transformation Whose Voice of Thunder Resonates from the Origin of the Nine Heavens granted her the boon of thunder...”

(TL: Also known as Leizu or Leizun, but they spell out his full title in the source text)

“The Heavenly Lord of Universal Transformation Whose Voice of Thunder Resonates from the Origin of the Nine Heavens? That's the strongest god of thunder Daoism has to offer... hey now, why does she have to have something so exaggerated, that little fox... ack, I see, come to think of it, Tamamo no Mae got to Japan after going through India and China. Is it through that connection...”

“Tamane-sama's special technique—《Nine Thunder Play》. If she drops that, this whole area'll be incinerated in a flash...”

“That's on another level... no, another class... man can't go up against the power of gods.”

Still face to the ground, the two exchanged unmotivated words. The colors of despair surfacing on their faces gradually grew thicker.

There.

At that moment, the phone in my pocket vibrated.

I took it out to see it was a call from Kai.

‘Akira, what's going on... this youkai power filling the air belongs to the nine-tails. Wasn't Tamane supposed to be sealed with her collar...’

For now, I explained whatever I knew.
There Kai gave a large sign.

‘《Nine Thunder Play》... That’s Tamamo no Mai’s technique. To think her daughter was training it as well... and this fox rain is the prologue, eh. Good grief. When it rains it pours... Akira.’

In a serious voice I’d never heard before, Kai went on.

“Call Orino Shiori-san.”

I tilted my head.
Why was Orino-san coming out here.

‘Tsuchimikado Senzou and Kikyouin Yuzuki... it will be impossible for those two to stop the power of the nine tails. No, I doubt there’s an onmyouji who can stop a rampaging fox, even in Kyoto. But... Orino Shiori. If it’s her... with her unreasonable ‘power’ that directly interfered with a shikigami, just maybe...’

I recalled the events of a few days ago.

The day I was showered with glass, and Orino-san rushed to help Kikyouin-san.

Kai had gazed at Orino-san curiously.

I had definitely seen a girl making an expression as if she was frightened by her own power.

‘It’s on you, Akira. This is a race against time.’

That was an entreating voice. I kept the phone to my ear as I looked around. A sky crowded with black clouds. What continued to fall from them, the rain that drummed against the ground. Looking up at the sky with hollow eyes, Tamane-chan chanting something like a spell, Tsuchimikado-san and Kikyouin-san who could only look on. After I had a grasp of the whole situation, I said this.

“I won’t. I’m sure Orino-san is busy.”

‘... Ey? H-hey, Akira.’

“And wait, I’m hanging up. It’s coming down hard, so I have to get back fast.”

‘Wait a second, Akira! Aki—’

I one-sidedly hung up and tucked the phone in my pocket. Standing up from

the ticket, I began walking. Leisurely, at my usual pace, I wandered up to Tsuchimikado-san and Kikyouin-san.

Yeah.

What's everyone even doing?

I totally feel like I've been left behind.

"... Hey now mister, what are you doing here... no, 'n wait, why can you walk normally through this idiotically powerful maelstrom of dark energy...? Is the punchline gonna be that you were actually an amazing spirit medium or something?"

"Wrong... This guy has absolutely zero spiritual sense, so he just doesn't feel any of it... He doesn't get just how amazin' of a feat he's pulling off right now..."

The two of them lifted only their heads, directing the eyes of someone looking at a rare lifeform at me.

"Kikyouin-san. I haven't the slightest idea what you're doing, but the weather's taken a bad turn, so we should be getting home. Ah, Tsuchimikado-san. We can talk the specifics when we get inside."

"" ... ""

At my commonsensical proposal, the two exchanged a look and sighed.

"... Hey, I'm begging you, just go off somewhere. I don't want to deal with you right now. If you value your life, I recommend you get out of this gown."

Though I doubt you'll make it in time, Kikyouin faintly added on.
In her eyes was... resignation.

With a face that had given up on anything, she faintly gazed at Tama-chan.

"Right, right, Tama-chan. It'll be bad if she catches a cold. I have to hurry and get her back."

I started towards the nine year old girl. But Kikyouin-san grabbed my ankles, making me feel like I would fall over.

"Wait right there! What are you thinking!? If you approach her right now, you won't get off scot free. You've got no spiritual sense, so you might not be able to tell, but... that's the same as having your sense of pain dulled with anesthetic. If you get any closer, you really will be in danger..."

“Danger? How so?”

“Ah, god! Just shut up and listen to what I have to say! Right now, Tamane-sama’s lost herself and been consumed by her—”

“There’s no way Tama-chan could be dangerous.”

“... And I’m telling you,”

“She’s your little sister. So of course she’s a good girl.”

“.....”

“She’s your precious family, isn’t she?”

I just said what was plainly obvious.

“... Haha. Ahaha... hahahahaha.”

And yet Kikyoin-san started to laugh and cry.

“Ahaha. Maan, how idiotic. Really, what even are you...”

She said, as she took out a charm from her breast pocket and handed it to me.

“This is...?”

“That one lets me synchronize my spirit with Tamane-sama to boost my—wait, it’s pointless explaining anything to you For now, could you just give that to Tamane-sama for me?”

“Yeah? I can do that.”

“Thanks... I’m leaving it to you.”

Yeah, I nodded and started off.

With one of her hands still directed at the sky, Tama-chan’s eyes were out of focus.

Another few meters00

“...!”

My knees gave way. Power drained from my whole body as I collapsed over the grass. Because my head slammed straight down, my mouth was infiltrated by damp foliage, and as I was spitting the taste from my mouth...

“Uu. Uweeeeeeeeeeeeeeh”

I vomited. As if my stomach had turned inside out, it expelled everything

inside.

Huh? I wonder what happened.

I kinda feel extremely sick...

“Oy! He’s really in for it!” Tsuchimikado-san screamed from behind. “Zero spiritual sense means he has zero resistance, right? If he touches such power from up close, the no matter who he is...”

Following on, I heard Kikyouin-san’s voice as well.

“Sorry! On second thought, give it up! You don’t have to give her the charm! Just run!”

Her desperate voice went on.

“Run away, Kagoshima! Kagoshima Akira!”

“.....”

That was the first time she called me by name.

Kikyouin-san actually knows my name...

I felt overjoyed, I wiped my mouth and stood.

I walked again.

From behind, stop! I told you to run, dammit! I heard various voices, but I ignored them and walked towards Tama-chan.

Even so, I really feel sick... I’m nauseous, I’ve got a terrible headache, my legs are shaking, and my vision’s hazy.

This is a cold. Yeah, I’m sure it’s a cold. The rain must’ve chilled my body.

I get the feeling my symptoms are getting worse, the closer I get to Tama-chan, but, well, that must be my imagination.

I continued walking.

With every step, an abnormal malaise raced through my body, but even so, I just kinda didn’t want to stop.

“... Tama... chan...”

It was becoming hard to move my mouth. I couldn’t enunciate properly. Perhaps that’s why Tama-chan wasn’t reacting to my voice at all. Her eyes that had lost their light simply stared at the clouds burying up the sky.

“... The rain’s... getting stronger... at this rate, Tama-chan, you’ll catch a

cold like me...”

I finally reached her side.

“And so...”

I handed over the charm I got from Kikyouin-san as I spoke.

“Let’s get you home, Tama-chan.”

The charm touched her small hand.

Tink.

Sparks scattered in my brain, an immense image streamed into my head—



From the moment what we could call self began to sprout, the collar was around our neck. Apparently, someone of the Kikyouin house stuck it on shortly after we were born.

Our mother, the fair gold-pelted jewel faced nine tailed fox is sealed in the Kikyouin family shrine. That’s what they would always tell us. Therefore, we devoted ourselves to serving the Kikyouin House. It was all to meet mother. To see what sort of face our mother would make. And yet to our stagnant time of servitude, a change came to us no more than two decades ago.

“Tamane-sama. There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

The then-head of the Kikyouin House, Kikyouin Kaede called out to us. As long as you turned a blind eye to her terrible personality, Kaede was a talented onmyouji, and at the time, the one who dragged us around was mainly Kaede.

“Say what? You want us to look after a baby!?”

“Yes. My daughter who was born the other day, I was thinking I’d get you to look after her. As the head of the Kikyouin House, I’ll have to go around the country, starting now.”

“We refuse! Why must we do such a thing!?”

“Is that so... what a shame. Well, let’s see. It really was asking the impossible for a youkai such as you to look after a human child. You can’t do what you can’t

do.”

“Wha...”

“I’m sorry for asking the impossible. It seems I expected too much from you. What a real shame. What to do, what to do. I guess I’ll hire a babysitter or something.”

“W-waid, Kaede!”

“Yes?”

“We will do it! We’ll raised her we say! To we who carry the clood of nine tails, there is no impossible!”

... Oh, what the malicious smile Kaede made at the time. But back the, we never were the wiser.



By the time I gained awareness, Tamane-sama was there. When I got home from school, the one who plated with me was Tamane-sama, and the one who taught me charms was Tamane-sama. Because I didn’t have any close friends.

“What’s wrong, Yuzuki? You’re not concentrating. You’ve returned to your habit of veering your body right in the third step of the uho. If you’re not motivated, stop it right there.”

I was around ten, perhaps. I was practicing charms in the mansion garden. As Tamane-sama said, at the time, I wasn’t able to concentrate at all.

“... At school, everyone was playing Kokkuri-san...”

I told her everything that happened at school. About how I snapped and laid hands on the classmates playing Kokkuri-san at school. And... about how everyone was looking at me coldly now.

“Hmph.”

Having heard the story, Tamane-sama gave a disinterested snort.

“Don’t seek understanding, Yuzuki. It’s a waste to put home in a human without spiritual sense. Furnish your body with the ability to live alone. Your mother, and her mother, and the mother before that learned and lived strong.”
“... But I’m lonely alone. Mother rarely comes home...”

“Ah, don’t cry... good grief, you don’t take after Kaede in the slightest. When she was around your age, she was saying, ‘Aren’t I loved by the gods?’ and happily prancing around... umm, I-look. Do you want to stop training and play kendama? Or perhaps hacky sack?”

She began to panic, yet awkward as she was, she called out gentle words. Whenever I started crying, Tamane-sama would always cheer me up like that. With that alone, my heart would feel a lot lighter.

“Uuu... then I wanna do playstation... let’s play PES.”

“... We don’t want to. We don’t know what you see in that box.”

Well, she was no good at video games, but I loved Tamane-sama.



Maybe Yuzuki was five.

While we were sipping tea on the mansion porch, Yuzuki came over with a smile. Back then, Yuzuki was a girl who smiled a lot. It must have been because she hadn’t yet understood her own fate.

“Hey, hey. Tamane-sama. That necklace is really pretty.”

As she said that with an innocent smile, we returned some ample cynicism.

“Hmph. I could do without it. Because of it, our youkai power has fallen below a tenth of what it should be, and we can’t even use that power without the Kikyoin House’s permission. It is no different from the collar you’d place on a dog or cat.”

“Then Tamane-sama, you don’t like having it on? If you don’t like it, you can just take it off.”

“If we could do that, we’d be a much happier fox. If a youkai like us touches it, we won’t get off lightly.”

“Really? Then I’ll take it off for you?”

Before we could even say what? the collar necklace fell with a clink. The detestable collar binding us to this house—was off.

“Okay. There you go, Tamane-sama!”

A smile we would go as far as to call radiant made us hesitate. There was no

longer anything binding us. We were free, with this, we would no longer be put to slave labor by Kaede, or have to look after Yuzuki.

Using all the power at our disposal, we could destroy the Tsuchimikado House and the Kikyouins, all the other famed houses around, we could save our sealed mother, and return to the world of the youkai by her side. And yet—

“... Put it back.”

We said. We ended up saying.

“Eh? Why, Tamane-sama...”

“We’re telling to hurry and put it back! Hurry, before we change our mind!”

While her body shook in shock from our rage, Yuzuki did what she was told, and put the accursed collar back around our neck.

“I’m sorry, Tamane-sama...”

“... So, that’s our line. We’re sorry for shouting at you.”

Yeah... that’s right.

We remembered.

On that day, we had chosen to be kept as a pet.

More than a mother whose face we didn’t know, we were far more fearful of losing our ‘now’ with Yuzuki.



There’s no way I would ever forget it. It was the day I greeted my tenth birthday.

“Yuzuki. The time has come to tell you the truth of the Kikyouin Clan.”

I was sitting on my knees in the room with the wooden floor. Across, my mother was sitting the same way. It was rare to see mother so serious, I remember it well.

“Tamane-sama’s mother... the fair gold pelted jewel faced nine tailed fox is already dead.”

I was at a loss for words.

Tamane-sama was always speaking proudly of her mother. Always talking about how she would one day meet her mother sealed away.

“T-that can’t be... mother! That means we’re deceiving Tamane-sama...”
“That’s right. We of the Kikyouin House are deceiving Tamane-sama.”

Mother nodded as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Eight hundred years ago, the progenitor of our Kikyouin House slayed Tamamo no Mae. But to do that, they used the dirty tactic of taking her newborn only daughter hostage.”

Tamane was held hostage?
A newborn, before she even opened her eyes?

“Well, when you think of Tamamo no Mae’s casualty count, perhaps there was nothing else to be done. That Tamamo no Mae did some crazy things back in the day—now then.”

Reverting her normal tone back to the serious one, mother went on.

“Ever since that time, we of the Kikyouin House were cursed. The ‘Clan possessed by the fox’. You’ve at least heard the rumors, right? By Tamamo no Mae’s curse, our clan can only birth female children, and on top of that, with each generation, the color of our hair comes closer to gold... the color of Tamamo no Mae’s pelt.”

With not a word in my head, I looked at my hair anew. So that was the reason my hair color was so close to Tamane-sama’s.

“The reason the curse ends at that, is because Tamamo no Mae’s daughter Tamane is tied to our house. While Tamane is employed by our household, we can stop the progression of the curse.”

I see, I was starting to accept it. So that’s why the Kikyouin House of long, long ago lied to Tamane-sama that Tamamo no Mae was still alive. They could conveniently get Tamane-sama to submit to the house and stay with it.

“But ya know, Yuzuki... oy, Yusuki.”

Mama returned to her usual tone again.

“I, see, I don’t think this is a curse, I’m thinkin’ it might just be love.”
“Love?”

“A mother’s love. I’m sure Tamamo no Mae wanted to protect ‘er daughter.

That's why she placed this here curse on us. To make sure we onmyouji could never kill her, this sort of spell."

Breaking out of her stiff sitting position, she ruffled up her gold hair. The same color as... my gold hair.

Near the same color as Tamane-sama's gold hair.

"Well, even if it's true, ya know? It doesn't feel right to hide it, right? Don't you feel the same?"

"That's, true. I do..."

"That's why I... had Tamane-sama raise you."

I was taken aback. I wasn't able to swallow down the meaning behind the words coming out of her mouth.

"Instead a trickin' her, I want Tamane-sama to cooperate with us because she wants to. And once that happens, Tamamo no Mae's curse will break someday. That's why I think."

"... Then mother, you used me?"

"I believed in you. That my daughter'd definitely be fine."

"..."

"It didn't work out for me. I could be Tamane-sama's partner, but I couldn't become her family. So ya see, Yuzuki. I'm handin' it off to you. You've got to properly raise our house's adorable pet."

I was so amazed I couldn't say a thing. As expected of mother. Whether it's her own daughter or not, she made use of anything she could get her hands on. That being the case, I didn't hold the slightest grudge against her for it. I mean, thanks to mother, I was able to live with Tamane-sama. I was able to get a gentle big sister.

— Hah.

When my consciousness returned, I felt the sensation of wet grass on my back. It seems I had collapsed face up at some point in time. When I lifted my eyelids, there wasn't a cloud in the sky, a radiant blue entering my eyes. The rain had stopped, it seems.

"....."

I wonder what those visions were. It seemed like tales of Kikyouin-san and

Tama-chan's past, but since Tama-chan's form hadn't changed in the slightest from how she looked now, there's no way that could be.

Yeah, just a dream I guess.

Even so, for me to lose consciousness just like that... it looks like I ended up catching a full-blown cold. I should hurry home, warm up, and get some sleep.

... Huh? But I don't feel sick at all anymore. No fever, no nausea, my head was strangely clear. My body was heavy, but I felt great.

For some reason, really great.

"Tamane-sama..."

Came a faint voice.

Unsteadily dragging her body up, Kikyouin-san started walking. At her destination lay Tama-chan.

Life had returned to her eyes as she gazed at her big sister with an anxious face.

"In the many years you've lived, I'm sure the time you spent with me really was no more than a trivial instant. But I've been with you from the moment I was born. Every bit of my time was spent together with you..."

At those words, Tama-chan closed her eyes.

As if she was processing a great many things, she made a grave expression.

"I don't expect you to forgive me... from now on, whatever I have to do to repent—"

"... It's fine, Yuzuki."

Tama-chan said with her eyes still closed. Her stiffly shut tears let a line of tears fall.

"Don't say a thing. You don't have to say anything."

When she opened her eyes, they were turned to the ground. Her fox eyes were trained on the necklace littering the ground.

"Hey, Yuuki. It looks like our necklace fell off."

Tama-chan said.

"Will you put it back on again?"

"... Of course."

With the strong nod of someone holding back tears, Kikyouin-san retrieved the necklace. Circling around to Tama-chan's back, she wrapped it around her neck with gentle hands.

As I watched that series of events, my chest grew warmer.

Kikyouin Yuzuki and Kikyouin Tamane.

They really are close sisters.

[IMAGE OF AFOREMENTIONED SCENE]

Epilogue

“Hmm. Then the case with that swindler called Tsuchimikado’s been resolved.”

At Kagurai-senpai’s words, I nodded a yes.

The ComClub room after school, we were the only ones there today. I watered the flowers Kurisu-chan had brought in, while Kagurai-senpai played dating sims.

Three days had gone by since that sudden evening shower.

Tsuchimikado-san said, “You totally saved my life there. I’ll never forget this debt as long as I live.” “No, I don’t care about that, just give me back my money. The remaining thirty thousand yen.” “... Ah, yeah, well, in due time my boy, in due time.” So while we had a verbal promise, I had no idea when specifically I’d be getting it back.

Kikyouin-san insisted, “If you don’t properly pay back his money, I’ll tattle to the main branch about this incident,” to hammer in the point, so I’m sure it’ll work out.

Not just about me, Kikyouin-san and Tsuchimikado-san talked about various things, thought I didn’t hear the specifics, but,

“He’s going on another journey, apparently. Doesn’t look like he’s a bad guy at heart, so perhaps it’ll be fine?”

She told me, so, well, I’m sure it’ll work out.

“So what happened with Kikyouin-san? She hasn’t been to school these past few days.”

“She’s said she was going to visit a grave with her little sister.”

The sisters were going together to visit a grave in the Tochigi prefecture. I don’t know who it belonged to. Now that you mention it, I think the fair gold-pelted jewel-faced nine-tailed fox—Tamamo no Mae turned into the Sesshouhoushi somewhere in Tochigi, but I doubt that has anything to do with the Kikyouin sisters.

“Hmm. Now that’s troubling. It’s about right time I got applications from all

members so I can make this a proper club, but if she's not attending classes...

"Ah, we're fine in that regard.

I took a single paper from my pocket. Unable to hold in my laughter, I couldn't help but curl my lips into a grin.

"This was entrusted to me."

The paper was a club application. On it, 'Kikyouin Yuzuki' was written in penmanship so fine it simply oozed the prestige of her heritage. She finally decided she would join our ranks.

"Hahaha. I see, that's good."

Kagurai-senpai gave a grand laugh.

"But for Kikyouin-san to entrust her application to you. It's a pleasant feeling just to imagine what a sight it must have been . I'm sure her face was bright red as she said, 'I-it can't be helped, can it' or something, right?"

"No, she had it express mailed to my house."

"....."

"Payment upon delivery."

"... You really are hated."

No, there's no way that can be true. I'm sure she was just too embarrassed to say it to my face. Yeah. I'm sure. Definitely...

... But she still hasn't unblocked me...

"Well, I definitely wanted to see Kikyouin-san's tsundere reactions, but I guess I'll just have to place my hopes on the future."

"Right, I'm sure there will be plenty of opportunities to come."

With a satisfied nod, Kagurai-senpai reached her hand to the desk beside her.

"Kikyouin's become an official member, so let's put up this picture with pride."

What she produced from the depths of the desk drawer was the photo of the five of us we took once upon a time.

She put it in a frame and set it up by the window.

Oh. That's kinda nice.

“We gathered numbers solely to secure this club room, but I’m sure we’re all here from some twist of fate. We’re stuck together anyway, I guess we should do some club-like things from time to time.”

“That’s right. I’ve got high hopes, president.”

We exchanged a look and laughed.

Our photo was in a proper frame, so a light gust of wind wasn’t going to knock it down. It wouldn’t drift down to the ground like a scene out of a dating sim opening, but even so, I thought it had a nice charm to it.

Another Epilogue

Come to think of it, I never did return that five hundred yen coin to Kai. On the way home from school, I made for the Inari Shrine.

“I wasn’t in any hurry.”

“We can’t be having that. Dad told me I have to be firm when borrowing and lending money.”

And from there, our time passed laid-back as ever. I nonchalantly explained the incident I’d been dragged into. I thought Kai would be interested in the details like only a Kai would.

He listened in with joy.

Once the story was over, he closed his eyes in deep thought,

“... So it’s finally happened, huh.”

He said.

In the eyes he opened resided an inhuman glimmer I had never seen before.

“The ‘Cage of Death Remnant’ has finally become able to interact with spiritual bodies.”

“Eh?”

Cage of death remnant? Ori no Shiori? Orino Shiori?

Did something happen to Orino-san?

“That being the case, the plan’s success rate is still only around five percent.”

“Plan...”

“Originally, the ‘Cage of Death Remnant’ was supposed to defeat an uho-weakened Tamane so she’d level up all at once. With the current one, defeating Tamane at full strength will be harsh, so I was thinking to adjust her power with the uho. I even got in touch with Tsuchimikado Senzou, and taught him a new technique to do it...”

He said with a bitter smile and looked at me.

“You got one up on me, Akira. I never even imagined you’d settle it like that. You really are an interesting one, you know that.”

The reason Tsuchimikado-san could come out with a new technique.
The reason Kai called me on the rainy day.
The reason he gazed at Orino-san so gleefully on that day of raining glass.
It felt like all my off feelings that remained were fusing together.

“But, well, it looks like the ‘Cage of Death Remnant’ grew a bit, so I’ll call it a success.”

I wonder what this feeling is.
This is almost as if...
As if all these recent events were set up for the sole purpose of having Orino-san defeat Tama-chan.
As if everything had happened on the palm of Kai’s hand.

“What are... you talking about...?”

My voice was shaking. A thorn of fear was born in my heart. The childhood friend before my eyes was no longer the childhood friend I knew.

“Mn? Oy, oy, I’d like to think not, but—”

Kai spoke.

“You aren’t under the misapprehension that I’m a Zashiki Warashi, are you?”
“...”

“You don’t think that a Zashiki Warashi used his ability to become friends before you know it to become Akira’s childhood friend, do you?”

Of course not.
I mean, there’s no way Zashiki Warashis exist.

“I guess that’s not happening. Because Akira doesn’t believe in that sort of thing. Ever since he met the lady in a strange suit in the park, he doesn’t believe... he doesn’t notice, does he? That’s right, that’s the Kagoshima Akira I know.”

His voice, his voice that had always been so clear grew muddled as if increasing in viscosity. His eyes continued letting off their vivid inhuman glimmer.

“I didn’t become your childhood friend with a Zashiki Warashi’s ability. I used a power that belongs to me alone to become your childhood friend. No, to make it that I always was, perhaps? The positions Daiki-kun and Yoshiko-chan held... I took them.”

— Weren’t your childhood friends Daiki-kun and Yoshiko-chan?
Orino-san’s words revived in my head.

“You weren’t the strange one, back there, Akira. It’s not like your memories were manipulated. The strange one was the Cage of Death Remnant. In this world, she alone can go, no continues to go against my ability—《Finishing Stroke》.”

In this world, she alone— is the strange one.
She alone can go against my power.
Kai added on, Ahaha, he innocently laughed.

“What saved you from the glass shards was also my 《Finishing Stroke》, but it’s not like I manipulated luck. That’s not the sort of ability it is.”
“... Ability?”

“Try to remember, Akira? I gave you a hint. Apart from my painfully obvious fake name Shi no Sekai: The world of death, I gave you another hint.”

I thought back.
Kai’s words that stuck with me most these past few days.

... If you fail, try again, however many times it takes.

“You noticed? That’s right. I redid it. Again and again, until you were miraculously unharmed. I think I reiterated the world a good twelve times back there.”

He reiterated the world.

He looped it again and again until a miracle happened.

To make coincidence into the inevitable.

He continued rolling the dice until he saw the number he wanted.

Until I miraculously came out unharmed in that incident, again and again.

“... What’s with that? Eh?”

“《Finishing Stroke》 is an ability that exists outside the time axis and the law of cause and effect. As I exist outside the world, I can ignore all time paradoxes that might occur from leaping around time. To put it really simply, I’m able to remake the world however convenient to me.”

In his viscous tone, a gentle smile on his face, Kai continued on.

“In dating sim terms, it’s the ability to jump to any route after I’ve already made my choice, perhaps? I used this power to become your childhood friend. I backtracked to your childhood, and spent ten years with you as your childhood friend. I watched you all the way.”

“.....”

The questions congested to a stop in my head.

... What are you talking about I never thought you were a Zashiki Warashi then how old even are you are you human the hells the Cage of Death Remnant is Shinose Kai a fake name What’s your real name isn’t that ability of yours too broken no matter how you look at it you knew about Kikyoin san and Tsuchimikado san but that’s not because you were a yokai but because you leap around time your kinda like Kagurai senpai Kai, weren’t we friends— I had so many questions, I couldn’t say a thing, simply keeping in silence.

“You really don’t know anything, do you?”

His pitying voice stuck into my heart.

“I know everything you know. About those girls you love as well.”

Kai spoke.

“For example, Kikyoin Yuzuki. She’s a true, honorable Onmyouji. The Tsuchimikado House carries the blood of the great onmyouji Abeno Seimei. She’s the eldest daughter of one of their branches, the Kikyoin House. The shikigami she handles are mainly pipe foxes, and the charms she’s best at are

lightning attribute. Because the fair gold-pelted jewel faced nine-tailed fox, Tamamo no Mae's only daughter Tamane raised her from when she was a baby, they're bound by a strong sisterly bond. Her fighting style of pipe foxes and lightning is due to Tamane's influence. Tamane is a fearsome youkai who had nine tails even when she was only just born, but before her powers could come to fruition, she was sealed by the Kikyoin House. Well, with this matter, I doubt the necklace will be necessary, but even so, she's got appearances to keep up, so she probably won't take it off."

Kai spoke.

"For example Kagurai Monyumi. She is an agent visiting from the distant future. She fights the revolutionary army Reloader that wishes to liberate humanity from a society ruled by machines. Her brother four years her elder, Gakuta, is currently a stuffed animal. When it comes to the Kagurai House, they're lined up with the Shyakujii House and the Shingai House as one of the Inoue Big Three. Her brother Gakuta had a whimsy personality, but he was an exceedingly skilled personnel. That was a fact attested to by the number of people who grieved his death. Of course, the saddest of all was his little sister Kagurai Monyumi. The weapon her avatar currently uses, Lill Sordia is a memento from Gakuta. By the way, the name Monyumi is relatively common in her time."

Kai spoke.

"For example Kurisu Crimson Kuria. She is a witch who came from another world. Her full name is Creastia Crimson Cridende Christopher Kurisu. Daughter of Kurisu Tooru and Allua Mills Cridende Christopher Shuley. The talented witch Allua was sung of as a flower out of reach, and she was particularly remarkable at fire attribute magic. Creastia inherited one hundred and twenty percent of her talent. More than a decade ago, in the battle of Togahr Ghouls that happened on the west coast of the Claire continent, Allua was excommunicated from the army of the capital of Rhulein, while Kurisu Tooru lost his life. Ah, also, she's actually fourteen. There's no middle school in the area, so she faked her age to get into Adatara High School."

Kai spoke.

“For example, Orino Shiori. She is a psychic affiliated with the World Unified Parahuman Research Facility, commonly called the Facility, and a Psychokinesis Special— just kidding. There’s no way that’s true.”

I couldn’t say anything. My mind wouldn’t turn, I didn’t know anything. It’s just, I knew his flow had stopped. The flow had stopped at Orino.

“The Cage of Death Remnant is... something I made.”

Made?

— Orino’s been here since she was born.

That’s what Masaki-san said. So why... what’s this sensation, as if something isn’t locking into place.

“Her ability isn’t psychokinesis. Her real ability— 《Book Marker》is too fearsome to even be compared to those measly abilities. Well, it’s incomplete for now, so it might look like psychokinesis.”

“.....”

“... In the first place, that facility itself was a tool I made to make the Cage of Death Remnant. An existence born in the cage called the organization, where countless deaths pile up like the dregs in your tea. Therefore, the Cage of Death Remnant. Orino Shiori. Don’t you think it’s a good name?”

I no longer felt the willpower to answer the question. But my thoughts were finally catching up. Everything I had written off as my imagination had stayed in my imagination so long they had reached my mind. Ventriloquism and Cosplay, playing exorcist and stomach pains. The seams all came undone as the dam burst open. The gentle curse the strange lady placed on me—melted away.

Yeah, I knew everything. I already knew.

I... noticed.

I ended up noticing.

“.. Why?”

I spoke.

There were plenty of things I wanted to say, but this was my first question.

“Why was it me... what did you become my childhood friend.,,?”

I was supposed to be the sort of normal kid you could find anywhere. There couldn't be any reason for Kai—no, the something before me—to stick his eyes on me.

On a side character like me, with no hopes of being the main character of anything.

“Ten years ago,” he spoke, “You met a single girl. You met the lady in the strange suit at Gentle Breeze Park. You’ve already noticed her real identity, haven’t you?”

“.....Yeah.”

Enduring the constricting pain in my chest, I managed to squeeze out my words.

“... That person was Orino-san, wasn't it? She was probably dragged into Kagurai-senpai's time leap, and just happened to appear before me.”

“We have a winner. As I thought, you're actually quite clever. The type who gets a flash of everything when you notice one part. It's just, the first step was sealed off, so you could never notice.”

He spoke merrily.

“That chance meeting ten years ago was one large event in your life. But you see, it was also a special event to her.”

Not just for me, for Orino-san as well.
That meeting ten years ago was special.

“Right after that, she managed to breach the jamming equipment of Masaki Souhei. She had broken a single wall. From that day, I had my eye on you. I used 《Finishing Stroke》 to become your childhood friend, and continued observing you... as a result, it hit me.”

He smiled. It was neither sweet or bitter, the smile didn't suit him.

“Kagoshima Akira was indispensable to the growth of the Cage of Death Remnant. Through you, she becomes able to touch multiple worlds, she's growing just as I want her to.”

Multiple world.
Like the world of those girls.

“This time, if she defeated that fox, she’d immediately be able to take another step up, but... well so be it. It’s interesting to see how this one will lead.”

“... Kai.”

I moved my shaking lip to speak.

“What exactly do you want to do...? What’s your objective?”

“My objective? That’s simple. I’ll complete the Cage of Death Remnant, make her 《Book Marker》 my own, and create the 《Neverending Prologue》.”

“.....”

“Your face says you don’t get it. Yeah. It doesn’t really matter. I was purposely speaking in a way you wouldn’t get.”

Gently. Kai stood. More gently than I thought possible for a human, yet also quietly and unsteadily.

“Let’s hope the day comes where you understand everything.”

He said as if it wasn’t his problem, and peered into my eyes.

I couldn’t move. It’s not like anything was being done to me, and yet I couldn’t move a single finger. I couldn’t avert my gaze from those eyes letting off a bewitchingly beautiful glimmer.

“The reason you can become the singularity point existence that joins multiple worlds is surely because you don’t notice. Normally, once you touch a single world, that world will draw you in. Kurisu Tooru who lost his life in another world is a good example.”

“.....”

“In order to complete the Cage of Death Remnant, you cannot notice.”

“... Don’t you think it’s a bit late for that?”

I had already noticed.

I had wasted all the thoughts and hopes they placed on me.

I had turned that lady’s... Orino’san’s wish I was so desperate to protect into nil.

“The reason I taught you so much today is because I wanted to see what sort of face Akira makes when he notices. That’s all. It really was just a whim, a passing fancy that had me let you notice. Yeah. You surprised me with a better face than I thought. There was some worth in talking to you.”

“.....”

I don't know anymore.
I don't know what's what.
But I felt exceedingly irritated. From the depths of my chest, a simmering feeling was building up.
What I... what we held dear was smashed to bits on this thing's whim!

"Oh, how scary, how scary. Hmm, so you can make that face too. It's the first time I've seen it, Akira's angry face."
"Kai!"

The feelings in my chest exploded, before I noticed it, I was clenching my wrist. For the first time in my life, I wanted to hit someone. But far before I could move, Kai grasped my head. Covering both my eyes with my left hand, he pinned me down to the stairs.

"I'm sorry, Akira."

The voice that rained down carried an extremely sorrowful ring to it. My eyes were covered, so I couldn't see his expression. Drip by drip, something fell to my face.

Tears?

Was he crying?

"... You were just dragged in. For the game of a shoddy god. I won't tell you to forgive me. But give it up."

"... K-Kai?"

"I believe in you, Akira. If it's you, I'm sure you'll be able to complete her—and so."

He spoke.



“I really can’t let you notice.”

The next instant,

A faint light ruled the world.

That same sensation I tasted a few days ago.

The sensation that space creaked, time distorted, and the world bent out of place.

Every component that made up this world was put to work for the sake of a single human existence. For someone, a story development far too inconvenient had taken place.

And tasting that peculiar sensation...

《Finishing Stroke》

I...

Another Epilogue: 'Only God Knows'

Come to think of it, I never did return that five hundred yen coin to Kai. On the way home from school, I made for the Inari Shrine.

"I wasn't in any hurry."

"We can't be having that. Dad told me I have to be firm when borrowing and lending money."

And from there, our time passed laid-back as ever. I nonchalantly explained the incident I'd been dragged into. I thought Kai would be interested in the details like only a Kai would.

He listened in with joy.

"Good work, Akira."

"Yeah? I didn't do anything."

"I just kinda, you know. Just kinda wanted to say it."

He narrowed his eyes and gave a gentle smile. Bitter and sweet, it was Kai's usual smile.

He was the same childhood friend as always.

My precious friend.

Shinose Kai.

From then on, we started reading books side by side.

I read a big and thick Corocoro, while he read a small, thin paperback novel.

"Akira, which one of Doraemon's tools would you want most?"

Kai said after a while. His eyes were focused on the Doraemon special feature page my Corocoro was open to.

"Hmm.. let's see. Well, when you're at my level, you'd have to go far back and say the Helitanbo, I guess. Ah, Helitanbo is the name they gave the Take Copter when it was first serialized."

"... At your level? What level is that?"

I lightly shrugged my shoulders, so Kai continued on.
His eyes trailed off somewhere far away.

“There are a lot of people who answer, ‘The What-if Box is the best!’ aren’t there?”

“Yeah, there are.”

“Those people don’t understand a thing.”

Kai slowly closed his eyes.

His mouth only slightly curved into a self-chastising smile.

“They don’t know anything about the futility, the pointless, the despair of making the world however you want it...”

As he opened his eyes, Kai gazed at the sky. Perhaps he was gazing somewhere far higher than that. It looked that way to me. From what I could see, I didn’t know anything.

I didn’t know who Kai was.

But there was one thing that was certain.

Shinose Kai was Kagoshima Akira’s childhood friend, and a precious acquaintance.

At the very least, I saw it that way.

I believed Kai thought the same.

I believed like crazy.

Postscript

To assert the individuality of this work, I'm always thinking of how to do things no one's ever done before. So I've done it. A heroine who honest to goodness just doesn't like the main character, and a male childhood friend!

... And now that I've done it, I understand. No wonder no one wants to do it. With this and that, it's been a while, this is Nozomi Kota.

This time, I only get one page of postscript, so let's get right to it.

First, some gratitude. I give my thanks to everyone in the world.

Next, some comments. The reason a certain character in this work wears their kimono the wrong way around does mean what you think it means, so don't get me wrong. I didn't make a mistake.

Now here's your preview. This one turned out relatively serious so the next volume will gag the hell of it. Specifically speaking, a certain heroine enters the bath with the main character.

Well then, if the chance arises, let's meet again.